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Abstract: High standards are required to succeed in the state upper secondary school system and many challenges have to be met. School principals with their leadership experience and practices are key actors to ensure the achievement of these goals. The study aims to find out Estonian state-operated upper secondary school principals’ understandings of their leadership practices and supporting factors of their work. The data were collected with semi-structured interviews with eight school leaders. They were analysed with directed content analysis and leadership practices were analysed in four dimensions: setting directions; building relationships and developing people; developing the organisation to support desired practices; improving instructional programmes. An inductive approach was used to analyse data to explore the supporting factors. The findings showed that principals followed all dimensions of successful leadership practices. An important dimension appeared to be building relationships with students and teachers. The main concern in their work regarding school improvement challenges was teachers’ workload. Principals saw the strength in having trustworthy and supporting relationships with the operator and being part of the state upper secondary school network. It would be recommended to systematically assess and develop the leadership competencies of school leaders along the dimensions of successful leadership and to closely address the professionalism and support of the school operator, because it was identified by school leaders as an important factor influencing their work.

Keywords: school leader; leadership practices; upper secondary schools

1. Introduction

One of the biggest changes in Estonian education policy during the last decade has been the reorganisation of the upper secondary school network, which also includes modernising the network of state upper secondary schools. It might be said that the state has taken control of the management and development of upper secondary education. The reform followed the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 that the Ministry of Education and Research developed as a part of the School Network Programme 2014–2020 focusing mainly on (1) modernising the school network taking into account demographic changes and (2) providing high-quality education throughout Estonia [1,2]. The need to reorganise the school network has been emphasised in earlier reports, e.g., in 2005, three different scenarios for action to react to changes in the education field were proposed: (1) maintenance of the status quo, (2) free evolving, and (3) active intervention. The decision was made to choose active intervention to design an optimal and integrated school network [1].

One of the main justifications for the reform was to ensure high-quality upper secondary education that offers ample choices everywhere in Estonia [3]. The reform has been implemented for over a decade, but when critically analysed there are no specific criteria for evaluating the quality and availability of general secondary education in state upper secondary schools [4]. To make an evidence-based assessment of achievements and make proposals for further improvements, agreed measurements would be necessary. There are
high expectations for these schools, and their leaders, but no research has been conducted
to analyse whether the leaders can meet these high expectations. There is also no evidence
whether the change in ownership (local government versus state) has been justified.

However, the process of state upper secondary school reform is still ongoing and, for
the next strategic period 2021–2035, to keep the high quality of education, the national
strategy of education is aiming to address the following challenges: … how to increase
accountability and cooperation between actors in the education system; how to validate knowledge
and skills, such as those acquired through work-based learning, in formal education, without
compromising the quality of education; how to organise learning in a learner-centred way and
support different types of learners, taking into account their gender, special needs, etc. [5] (p. 7).

State upper secondary school principals with their leadership practices are the key
actors in understanding the need for implementing national policy and, more importantly,
engaging team members to contribute to the changes, especially taking into account the
high standards expected from the public and monitoring bodies. As mentioned in the
Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035—heads of schools should create a learning culture and
environment that supports learning and well-being, skilfully managing and implementing changes,
and upgrading the role of support specialists and their cooperation with teachers [5] (p. 5). Estonian
school leaders have a great degree of autonomy [6] but that entails responsibility. Principals
are responsible for developing teachers and pedagogical concepts, enhancing the teaching
and learning processes, and coordinating the school’s resources [7].

All challenging and demanding goals outlined above to be met by state upper sec-
ondary school principals require good leadership skills. Leadership quality is a key factor in
student outcomes, staff motivation, working conditions, and engagement in school [8–11].
In the literature, several theoretical elements of leadership have been highlighted that in-
fluence school leadership, such as distribution of leadership [8,10,12], collaborative school
culture [7,13], shared and acknowledged vision and goals [8,14], etc. The central task for
leadership is to help improve employee performance . . . Successful school leadership, therefore, will
include practices helpful in addressing each of these inner and observable dimensions of performance
… [15] (p. 29) Therefore it is important to emphasise the influence of leadership practices
and the lack of these, for example, on student learning [16], establishing collaborative
learning communities [17], or supporting teacher involvement in school leadership [7]—all
indicated as important aspects of school development. Yet, if school leaders are not aware
or do not consciously practice relevant leadership dimensions it might have a negative
effect on the school climate, which in turn affects school violence, learning and school
success [18], student outcomes [11], or teacher job performance [19].

The success of school leaders in implementing leadership practices depends on the
environment and the support and clarity of expectations from the provider.

Therefore, this study investigates state upper secondary school principals’ leader-
ship practices and their perceived support in the state upper secondary
school network from their providers.

Two research questions have been raised:
1. What are the leadership practices that state upper secondary school principals claim
to use?
2. How do state upper secondary school principals perceive the providers’ support?

2. Theoretical Background

To investigate and provide context for state upper secondary school principals’ leader-
ship practices, research was carried out based on a successful school leadership framework.
Firstly, we aimed to obtain a good comparison with the best and most useful practices and
obtain a deeper understanding of the crucial management tasks and how leadership has
been seen as a crucial factor in managing changes. Secondly, we discussed the support
mechanisms that support leaders in their work.
2.1. Leadership as a Crucial Factor in Managing Changes

Leadership quality is one of the most crucial elements for managing change in school, and it has a great impact on school climate, influencing students’ learning and outcomes [7,9,10,20,21]. The principal’s task is to create a vision for the school that covers their personal and professional values and shares and communicates that vision to staff members, students, and the wider community [22]. It is considered to be the principals’ responsibility and authority to create a learning environment for both teachers and students in enhancing student learning outcomes [23].

The most commonly mentioned categories of successful school leadership are: setting directions, building relationships, developing people and organisation, and supporting the instructional programme [7–9,21,24]. It is also emphasised that empowering, contextually sensitive, and collaborative working relationships and school culture that create an atmosphere of trust are essential to schools that are innovative, ready to cope with changes, and adapt new teaching and studying practices [7,25,26]. School leaders, particularly principals, have a key role to play in setting direction and creating a positive school culture including the proactive school mindset, and supporting and enhancing staff motivation and commitment needed to foster improvement and promote success for schools in challenging circumstances [24] (p. 7). In addition to the previous dimensions, school principals also have the commitment and the authority to influence teachers’ learning and development, as they allocate the school’s financial and human resources [7]. Also, an increasing amount of research highlights the importance of leaders’ actions by promoting changes and empowering school personnel. For example, recent research shows that principals’ strategic work with school structure and culture contributes to the academic and social goals of schools [27]. Surveys have also confirmed that leadership practice influences school climate and learning conditions which in turn have an impact on keeping the school attainment level in an upward trajectory [28]. Research of principals’ leadership influence on school organisation climate and teachers’ performance showed a strong connection between each measurement [29]. The results of cross-country educational research criticised the school leaders for lack of attention to teaching goals rather than how they teach in the classroom and not being successful in promoting teachers’ performance [30].

Leadership is an extremely complex and thoroughly researched topic in all fields, including in education. Bush and Glover define leadership as a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes [9] (p. 554). The theoretical approaches are essential because they give a framework to interpret principals’ actions and allow them to analyse and compare different school leaders’ practices and learn from each other [9]. In this study, leadership is not analysed in a context of a distinctive focus on concrete leadership form (e.g., transformational, distributed, teacher, instructional, or managerial leadership) as in everyday work school leaders rarely practice one specific kind of leadership form. There might be a combination of conscious and unconscious principles, ways, and methods that school leaders combine. A more comprehensive approach for comparison was used by Leithwood and colleagues (2020) [8] who carried out a substantial leadership-related literature review and formulated seven strong claims about successful leadership. The authors brought out the aggregate and formed the seven claims, but also state that not all of them are strong in quite the same way. For that reason and because of the scope of this study, the focus is based on the second claim, which states: almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices [8] (p. 7) which sums up all seven claims. These domains are: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organisation to support desired practices, and improving the instructional programme. The following table (Table 1) gives an overview of the four domains and specific leadership practices that successful school leaders are using.
### Table 1. Successful leadership practices [8] (p. 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of Practice</th>
<th>Specific Leadership Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Set Directions</strong></td>
<td>Build a shared vision, Identify specific, shared, short-term goals, Create high-performance expectations, Communicate the vision and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Build Relationships and Develop People</strong></td>
<td>Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff, Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members, Model the school’s values and practices, Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents, Establish productive working relationships with teachers’ federation representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices</strong></td>
<td>Build a collaborative culture and distribute leadership, Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration, Build productive relationships with families and communities, connect the school to its wider environment, Maintain a safe and healthy school environment, Allocate resources in support of the school’s vision and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve the Instructional Programme</strong></td>
<td>Staff the instructional programme, Provide instructional support, Monitor student learning and school improvement progress, Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recent studies of the closure period of COVID-19 particularly demonstrated the importance of leadership skills. For example, a leader’s knowledge of pedagogy was found to contribute to a meaningful restructuring of teaching and learning at a critical time [31]. Leaders who have embraced collaborative approaches are better prepared to cope with unpredictable change, drawing on a range of experience and knowledge to make decisions [32,33] and collaborative practices and distributed leadership played a significant role shifting to distance learning [34].

Moreover, these characteristics in the school community have been shown to increase creativity and responsiveness in crisis [35,36]. Nevertheless, research also demonstrates principals’ concerns regarding their ability to engage all teachers in decision-making or leadership practices, as reported by Ahtiainen et al. (2021) [37]. Recent studies also emphasise that leadership is a group effort rather than an individual one [38], so leaders need to engage other people and support their leadership capacity. However, principals appear to lack the necessary skills to establish a school environment that effectively supports teacher initiative [39].

### 2.2. Supporting Leaders in Their Work

Schools’ and principals’ work is influenced by the provider’s vision, guidance, and working culture. The school provider’s role in school work and improvement activities is broad-based; their main functions are to approve the school curriculum and statute, allocate financial resources, employ the principal, and form boards of trustees and they have a right to carry out official supervision [40].

The state has provided, in the form of the national curriculum, a framework for planning its leadership and school development. The national curriculum defines study objectives and duration and also gives guidelines for the school curriculum and other legally relevant details [41]. Setting a legal framework is just one aspect of guiding and support for schools at a national level. Although a certain amount of self-efficacy is expected from leaders [42], it is necessary to offer support and backing for school leaders as well. Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) [25] introduce the concept of professional capital to design the future of school leaders and the teaching profession. They also offer guidelines for school providers that are well-aligned with general leadership principles: (1) create a shared
vision, (2) instead of controlling and comparing schools, evoke capacity building, collective development, and high expectations, (3) support school leaders to make effective decisions and collaborate to create coherence, (4) enforce teachers’ and school leaders’ career paths not just at the beginning or end of the career, but in the high-performing middle, (5) the school provider has to be capable and credible—strategic, systematic, and connected [25].

Previous research found that school leaders’ approaches to school visioning were largely related to external contextual factors concerning public expectations of schools and values and policy-making in schools [7], confirming that context plays a crucial role in how leadership strategies are implemented [43]. Thus, the failure of local education providers to develop a regional-level vision may explain the lack of shared leadership and presumably limit collaboration between schools locally. A shared vision for schools under the same local education provider aims to achieve coherence at the local level, reduce competition, and increase collaboration within and between schools [44,45]. With this in mind, school providers must have a clear vision, a concrete understanding of the development of schools under their authority, an action plan to support their schools, and a sense of responsibility for the tasks entrusted to them.

Thus, the success of school leadership depends both on the leadership skills of leaders and the environment in which they work, including the support and clear expectations from the provider. This study aims to investigate the state upper secondary school principals’ understanding of their leadership practices and their perceived support from their providers. Two research questions have been raised:

1. What are the leadership practices that state upper secondary school principals claim to use?
2. How do state upper secondary school principals perceive the providers’ support?

3. Method

In order to find answers to the research questions, eight semi-structured interviews with state upper secondary principals were conducted. Direct content analysis was used to study respondents’ leadership practices and supporting aspects of their work. To provide a better understanding for readers, the context of the study is provided.

3.1. Context of the Study

The Estonian education system has been based on the principle of expedient decentralisation since the early 1990s, giving the responsibility of operating schools to local governments [46]. In terms of the national curriculum, schools have autonomy to create their own curriculum, and in this context schools in Estonia have been seen as highly autonomous [47]. All principals in Estonia according to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act are responsible for promoting the teaching and learning process and observing the use of the school’s resources and development [40]. Schools also have to adopt a three-year School Improvement Plan for further school improvement [48].

In Estonia, there are three types of schools depending on the type of provider—private, local government, and state [40]. Historically, local government-provided upper secondary schools with years 1 to 12 have prevailed in the Estonian education system. Since the reform, starting in 2010, of the upper secondary school network, the state in the form of the Ministry of Education and Research has taken the role of provider in the upper secondary level. The reform of upper secondary schools in Estonia was driven by The Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, where one of the stated obstacles was that the network of upper secondary schools did not meet the needs of a significantly decreasing number of students. The former caused circumstances where small upper secondary schools were not able to guarantee diverse, high-quality learning opportunities. The lack of students, teachers, and financial resources was not sustainable [2]. As a solution, the strategy stated that opportunities for good quality and diverse upper-secondary education need to be provided in all counties . . . and aimed to achieve that upper-secondary schools are separate from basic school and reside under the State’s competence [2] (p. 17).
The impact of that reform was vast and personal to a large part of society. It caused widespread school closures, separating levels of schools, and creating new schools. The whole country of Estonia and many local communities were influenced by the reform. It required thorough planning and convincing and solid justifications.

In 2012 and onward during the following decade, thirteen state upper secondary schools were opened, in September 2023 five new schools will start operating, and the final state upper secondary school opens its doors for students in 2024.

To ensure quality, to sustain the results of the reform achieved until now, and to continually move towards more detailed goals, for example, creating a collaborative network of state upper secondary school and vocational schools, the Ministry of Education and Research and school principals sign a quality agreement. With this agreement, the state’s goal is to ensure that the school environment supports the individual development of each student and school staff member. With this document, the Minister of Education, school principal, teachers, and students agree on basic principles and responsibilities for all parties [49].

The Education Strategy 2021–2035 set new aims for schools, such as ensuring learning environments that guarantee access to high-quality and forward-looking education, better infrastructure and quality of the school physical environment, and more efficient use of resources, including streamlined sharing of educational infrastructure [5].

3.2. Participants

The total sample of state upper secondary school principals was 13. First, five school leaders who are in a position of starting schools but where students have not yet enrolled were excluded from the sample. Then, principals with different backgrounds in age; gender; level of education (MA or PhD); length of work experience as principal; size, location, and age of the school were chosen. Altogether, 8 principals were targeted (see Table 2). The schools’ locality differed from large to small towns and from larger centres to rural areas. The functioning years of the school ranged from 1 to 10 years. From the perspective of the regional school network, six of the state upper secondary schools sampled are the only upper secondary education schools in the area, therefore they are the only option for the students unless they leave home for school, while two of the state upper secondary schools are operating in towns with several options for upper secondary education. To ensure the anonymity of respondents, the data have been used at a general level and the detailed information about the interviewees has been cleared. Table 2 provides information about the interviewed principals and the schools.

Table 2. The background information of the principals and their schools (N = 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal No.</th>
<th>Age Group of Principal</th>
<th>Work Experience as a Principal (Years)</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Students in School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>15–18</td>
<td>200–300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>13–15</td>
<td>100–200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>400–500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>8–11</td>
<td>400–500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>8–11</td>
<td>100–200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>4–7</td>
<td>200–300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>400–500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>22–25</td>
<td>100–200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected with semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews as a method are suitable because the aim was to find out about respondents’ perceptions and opinions regarding sophisticated and sensitive topics and to understand their personal approach towards subjects of research interest [50]. The interview consisted of five blocks of
questions: (1) the reasons or circumstances of becoming a principal; (2) the important leadership practices; (3) the values and understandings they believe support the development of the school; (4) understanding of the role of state upper secondary schools in the Estonian educational system; and (5) attitude towards currently relevant educational innovations, e.g., teacher leadership, evidence-based leadership, and distributed leadership.

Each of the 8 interviews lasted approximately one hour. Two of the interviews were performed via Zoom and the other six were face-to-face meetings. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the Estonian Speech Recognition and Transcription Editing Service [51]. During the interview, the communication took place in Estonian and later the data were translated into English for the presentation of the research results.

3.4. Data Analysis

To understand what kind of leadership practices the state upper secondary school leaders state to be important and valuable, a directed content analysis was used to analyse the data. This approach allows one to study the phenomenon of interest in conventional, theory-directed, and summative ways [52,53]. In social sciences research, including educational sciences and educational policy, there has often been a great need to combine deductive and inductive approaches to present interesting and more rich findings from data [54]. To analyse findings about state upper secondary school principals’ perceived support from the provider, the Ministry of Education and Research, an inductive approach is used to study the dataset.

The analysis of the data took place in a software tool for qualitative content analysis, the open access web application QCMap. QCMap is suitable for inductive category formation as well as coding in the deductive category application [55]. First, the deductive analysis was conducted based on an adapted form of dimensions of successful leadership practices [8] (p. 7). Successful leadership practices became the basis for planning school improvement programmes in the future. In the initial coding phase, we tested the fit of the model and based on that we gathered some sub-dimensions. All main dimensions listed as important for successful leadership were analysed as presented in theory but some sub-dimensions were combined if separately they were too detailed when presented and our data did not allow us to go into them in depth. Some sub-dimensions (e.g., establish productive working relationships with teachers’ federation representatives) were excluded from the analyses because there were no data available. The coding scheme is presented in Table 3.

Coding example: regarding the main dimension build relationships with the sub-dimension building a trusting relationship with and among staff, students, and parents, a principal expressed: And teachers were disturbed at first by the fact that we play, tell stories and spend two days doing just being pleasant. Well, now they’ve admitted that it’s the best start for a school. That we didn’t sit behind some desks in the classroom and weren’t immediately practical. There was laughter, there was joy, everything else, and because of that, we dare to laugh and cry together today. We also dare to tell each other—listen, this is not appropriate (P3).

Then, inductive analysis was conducted to point out strengths school leaders perceive in leading in the system of state upper secondary schools and the significant support mechanisms that school leaders value that are provided by the school provider. Eight areas of advantages were expressed (well-formatted expectations, strong support, well-set vision and values, sharing know-how, supporting each other, pure upper secondary level, not being a participant in local affairs, modern school environment) (see Table 4).

The analysis was conducted In four phases: firstly, the data were examined by both coders—two researchers contributed to the process to ensure the validity; secondly, the theoretical framework for research question 1 was made applicable to the study; thirdly, the coding rules and coding schemes for both research questions were discussed and agreed; finally, the coding schemes were theoretically conceptualised and abridgementally formulated.
Table 3. Coding scheme of successful leadership dimensions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Dimensions</th>
<th>Sub-Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Set Directions</td>
<td>• Build a shared vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create high-performance expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identify specific, shared, short-term goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate the vision and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Build Relationships and Develop People</td>
<td>• Model the school’s values and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Develop the Organisation to Support Desired Practices</td>
<td>• Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build productive relationships with families and communities, connect the school to its wider environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maintain a safe and healthy school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allocate resources in support of the school’s vision and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Improve the Instructional Programme</td>
<td>• Provide instructional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monitor student learning and school improvement progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff the instructional programme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Coding scheme perceived support mechanisms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School provider’s professionalism</td>
<td>• Well-formatted expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Strong support to principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not being a participant in local affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Well-set vision and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. State upper secondary school network</td>
<td>• Sharing know-how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Supporting each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pure upper secondary level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Modern school environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding example: The main category school provider’s professionalism and sub-category strong support to principals: But, let’s say, in terms of such a resource, the school provider still has to think and realise that if the school principal is given the task of supporting and
creating an environment to develop the teachers and, through that, students. That the school provider has to create opportunities and develop the environment so that the principal can move forward and give his feedback, how it looks to the school providers, as well as support (P5).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

As Estonia is a small country, a great emphasis was put on anonymising the data. All principals were presented in the dataset with code numbers, and the schools’, towns’, and organisations’ names were taken out for data analysis. The data were encrypted with ID software DigiDoc4 and stored in an external hard drive that only the researchers had access to. This study did not require a permit from the ethics committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the respondents were informed about their rights and the purpose and target of the work.

4. Findings and Discussion

First, the dimensions state upper secondary school principals addressed when talking about leadership in their work are presented and discussed. The findings are described regarding the following dimensions: (1) set directions, (2) build relationships and develop people, (3) develop the organisation to support desired practices, and (4) improve the instructional programme (see Table 3). Next, when answering research question 2 about support mechanisms for school leaders, regarding how state upper secondary school principals perceive the support towards their leadership offered by the provider, the Ministry of Education and Research, two categories with sub-categories appeared during the analysis: (1) school provider’s professionalism and (2) support from the network of state upper secondary schools (see Table 4).

4.1. Leadership Dimensions

4.1.1. Set Directions

All the respondents talked about building a shared vision as an important leadership strategy. Notably, their understandings of visions were consistent with the set of objectives for state upper secondary schools—high-quality education with wide choices, a student-centred approach to support their individual development, and to offer that to all the regions in Estonia [3]. That might be interpreted as a well-shared vision, common objectives at the national level that are embraced by school leaders. Two distinctive aspects of building a shared vision occurred—value-based visions and a vision of a supportive learning environment. School leaders addressed the importance of shared values of generating curiosity and co-creation, promoting lifelong learning and openness, trusting relationships, and commitment.

We not only follow the teaching process but also go to the overall values of the organisation—meaningfulness, commitment, and diversity. That we value these things in our principles (P3).

Also, the need to support students’ learning and safety by ensuring a pleasant school environment was expressed as students’ interest and self-actualisation:

Basically yes, still the fact that they want to learn, actually want to come here themselves and they want to study (P6).

However, the plan of action for principals to constantly keep the shared vision under scrutiny was not revealed in the interviews.

All principals emphasised high-performance expectations, not specifically towards teachers and students but to the school as a whole organisation. This seemed to rely on the concept of being a state upper secondary school and feeling society’s expectations to succeed and to bring upper secondary education onto a new level of quality or guide the changes in the Estonian education system.

State upper secondary school leaders saw their schools as pioneers in adapting education innovation to encourage others to follow, which also assumes high performance.
Another leading aspect of high-performance expectations was building trust in the community, showing that a newly established school is good and trustworthy. Since many (seven in the sample) of state upper secondary schools came to replace previous upper secondary schools loved by alumni and parents, they also have to provide a very good education, if not better than before.

As a main alternative for good academic education in the area, state upper secondary schools need to pay attention to offering competitive learning opportunities for gifted students:

*Then we are in a special situation in the sense that there always have been and will be few of the brightest minds, who live here, there are very few who go elsewhere. So this means that in fact we always have to deal with the talent policy quite keenly, . . . . (P7).*

Only three of the respondents spoke about setting specific *short-term goals*. However, two of the principals were more specific in this matter and declined to follow all of the many development programmes offered to schools but considered which programme is suitable for the school to join. Instead, they set a maximum of 1–2 goals for every school year and did that based on the results of feedback questionnaire results.

The principals talked about *communicating their vision* and plans in order to keep the school team informed or talking to people about their ideas for development. They understood that constant explaining and answering the “why” questions are essential for the changes to succeed.

*I present my thoughts to some of the teachers to think and then to think again, and then communicate again. And at some point, this common ground emerges, and from the surface of this common ground, I go with this bigger message, in front of the whole team (P6).*

Some principals mentioned that when creating their team they favoured applicants that shared organisational values and tried to get the hang of their understanding towards school value orientations. Five of the respondents emphasised the need to argue and communicate their decisions to staff.

*The decisions made by a leader must be well, sufficiently argued, understandable, clear and also evidence-based (P5).*

School leaders also mentioned the importance of declaring the school’s vision, progress, and actions to the general public. The importance of using every opportunity to remind teachers and other stakeholders about the vision [22] was well-acknowledged in most cases. Seven school leaders voiced strong opinions about setting directions and building shared vision and constantly acknowledging the need to achieve them or to communicate the importance of an agreed set of directions. However, keeping the wider community informed remained scarce and no concrete actions were mentioned in the interviews.

To sum up, the principals considered the *direction-setting* dimension important. This is in line with Leithwood et al. (2020) [8] who emphasised the need for setting directions. School leaders who, in their responses, mentioned the existence of a strong vision and also claimed to be supporters of that vision seemed the most convincing in their perceptions to practice successful leadership. Direction-setting also has been proven to have an effect on teachers’ perception of empowerment [56]. However, two of the principals did not want to set directions at the school level and they expressed their doubts regarding great and distant goals.

An impression was raised that the importance of setting directions is something that is not to be questioned, but none of the principals seemed to put too much significance on that aspect as a relevant dimension in leading a school. For example, they did consider student well-being an important goal but did not believe it to be a commonly shared direction of the organisation. However, in the literature it is often considered that setting clear directions is necessary for fostering collaborative culture and contributing to teachers’ emotional
state, as well as organisational learning, and, as a consequence, it has a positive impact on students’ learning [56].

The second interesting aspect of setting directions by state upper secondary school principals was that the prominence of the vision was influenced by clear targets of the state. For example, goals stated by the provider and communicated to the public by the provider, the promises that state upper secondary schools will provide high-quality education, or justification of the negative collateral effect of the school reform. Seeing a broader, system-level perspective is important for successful leaders to guide their organisations toward innovation and the direction of future challenges. According to earlier studies, findings show that direction-setting is a matter of leadership influence on student learning and teacher performance [20] as well as taking external contextual factors into consideration [7,43].

4.1.2. Relationships and People Development

Being a role model and demonstrating the school’s values and practices were mentioned by five school leaders and for them they were a very important aspect with a great relevance:

If role models are consistent in their demands [to students and themselves], then good things [changes, learnings] happen. In many cases, we gladly assess the student, but what about the role models themselves? . . . (P7).

Principals also saw themselves as an example for teachers and other staff members, because they attentively pay attention to the leader’s actions and words, if they act according to stated values and towards the goals. Two of the school leaders emphasised the nurturing aspect of school not only in teaching but in the need for teachers to understand their position as an example for students and shape their judgement about being a valuable and stable member of society.

Principals considered it important to share their values and build trusting relationships during the process of creating their teams. Due to the occasion of starting a new school, they had that opportunity. Building trust and deciding to trust each other, between students and teachers as well as staff and leaders, was an aspect emphasised by most of the principals. One of the impact factors was working together with young adults:

In other words, trust in the sense that we trust as a decision, so to speak, that when new students come, new people come, we first decide to trust, and, time will tell if it is justified or not (P5).

The principals described building trust through being available and present in the school and making an effort to create a relationship and communicate with colleagues and students. Involving students and taking into account their views and opinions was stated as especially important by one of the respondents:

And it’s really the case with them that I listen to them. And the most important questions all go through school student government. And if they say no to something, that thing won’t happen in the school either (P6).

Principals also claimed that trusting relationships are a big part of creating a good school climate.

Stimulating teachers’ growth in their professional capacities and providing support to be successful in their teaching was discussed at two levels: individual and collegial. At the individual level, a format to promote professional growth was mutual conversations. Interestingly, principals said that they trust teachers to be professionals and evaluate their competencies, while leaders saw their role more to encourage colleagues in the context of wider educational changes. But, they understood that it is their task to see the opportunities for improvement, develop a trusting environment for growth, and support their teachers’ professional and emotional well-being. In collegial level formats of joint learning like study circles, visiting each other’s lessons and other schools was pointed out. One of the principals talked very enthusiastically about study circles as a good format for teachers’ professional development:
We have a whole school year-long programme of study circles, where students and teachers conduct study circles on many different topics that are directly related to teaching and understanding learning. And different teachers take responsibility for some areas (P2).

Two principals were sceptical about this format and felt that their team is not ready to learn that way but hoped to reach it someday. It was clear in all responses that in cases of initiating changes, the responsibility for training and development lies with the implementer of the change, i.e., the headmaster. Principals also said that they benefit from the mentoring system in creating collaborative organisation culture.

To sum up, relationships and people development are some of the most valued areas of leadership for all interviewed principals. They stated that relationships not only between the leadership team and teachers and students but also the wider community (parents, local community) are the most important outcome of their leadership work and that achieving the goals and objectives is supported by the development of the staff. Creating a cohesive team that works towards common goals and a supportive working environment was addressed by principals as an important part of leadership. Earlier research confirms that relationships are essential dimensions of school climate [18] and have an influence on teachers’ job satisfaction [57]. Leithwood et al. (2020) [8] and Day et al. (2020) [24] both stress that school leaders’ contributions go well together with the dimension of developing people. This includes building trusting relationships between different stakeholders, including leaders and staff, teachers and students, as well as the school as an organisation and students and families. This was stated to be the key concept in forming a good school [24]. This attitude is supported by previous research stating that partnerships between schools and different stakeholders improve schools and strengthen local communities [58]. The need for deeper collaboration and networking was not strongly brought out by state upper secondary school principals. Interestingly, only one respondent felt a lack of cooperation with parents and the wider community, although it should be mentioned that all the respondents saw state upper secondary schools to be an influencing factor in the community and stressed the need to build trust amongst the wider population in the area. But the wish to have closer collaboration was not discussed as a need for action but rather as a distant future option.

4.1.3. Organisational Development towards Desired Practices

The school leaders emphasised the responsibility to build and create an environment for collaborative culture and distributed leadership. Five of the respondents claimed to have started creating collaborative cultures already when building up their teams and the school as an organisation. The principals considered that the involvement of the teachers in guiding changes or planning school development is important.

We didn’t start the school so the principal sent the files—this is our school’s statute and here is the curriculum. All of us, absolutely all of us, contributed day and night to the creation of these documents. To make them feel that it was their school . . . and it is really taken into account what they think (P3).

It was also stated to be important to create a supportive environment and relationships between teachers and leaders. It was seen as a way to collaborative school culture that is essential for moving towards desired practices or making changes in schools. Three of the respondents declared that state upper secondary schools are expected to be bold in trying out new ways of teaching and learning. It was agreed by state upper secondary school principals that it was necessary to support teacher development through a pleasant work environment and good relationships. There was variation in understanding distributed leadership, but all principals agreed that it is a suitable form of leadership and five of the respondents stated that they practise this. But, there were some objections towards distributed leadership. Firstly, principals mentioned that teachers do not accept distributed leadership concepts due to earlier experiences of leadership that did not support that. Teachers are not comfortable with that concept and do not see the point in exercising
distributed leadership. Also, two of the school leaders talked about teachers who do not want to be leaders but assured that it is very important that they are included in decision-making and leading the changes:

You must have all your teaching staff with you. If 80 percent of the teaching staff is not with you, there will be no real change (P7).

In the dimension of building productive relationships with families and local communities and the wider environment, the main aspect was to create trust, i.e., creating a relationship with the community so that students do not leave the area. However, a closer relationship is not mentioned, nor do the principals feel the need for it. On the other hand, connections of the school to its wider environment/networking with other schools was mentioned a lot in the context of the network of state upper secondary schools. The cooperation was affirmed to be functioning well and supportive. Competition is seen as an obstacle to the development of other possible school networks in Estonia.

Besides, one of the nice things about state secondary schools is that we are not in competition with each other. So, well, we can actually discuss all things together. . . . It seems to me a little bit that if you compare it with the other areas, that in some places it has been a kind of competitive thing, and it seems it still is, then you can only lose (P4).

In terms of maintaining a safe and healthy school environment, one of the arguments was the state upper secondary schools’ newly built or renovated buildings with modern physical environments and low maintenance costs:

This kind of environment is standard, so to speak. If you really look at the architecture awards, there are quite a lot of them in education lately, and that’s really cool (P4).

A safe environment provides an opportunity and an incentive to learn well. School leaders also highlighted good relationships as the basis for a safe environment. Creating a positive chain of relationships—the principal is good with the teacher, the teacher is good with the student, and vice versa. One principal also said that mental violence in school is unacceptable and must be precluded at every level.

Teachers’ workload is a relevant aspect of school leadership, particularly leading the changes. Principals talked worryingly about monitoring their colleagues’ workload and making efforts to balance that. They stated it to be a matter of mental well-being which is an essential aspect of a healthy school environment. Besides workload, a need for a constructive and benevolent feedback climate for students and colleagues was mentioned to be part of maintaining mental well-being.

Besides collaborative culture, good relationships, and a healthy environment, school leaders also felt that they have to ensure there are resources to support the school’s vision and goals. That means creating conditions for teachers to do their work and for students to learn (a good learning environment). However, additional planning is required for implementing changes—time, finances, workload, information, and work reorganisation. Respondents highlighted that integration, collaborative teaching, and making changes are expensive and require a list of funds:

One of the main tasks of the principal is to deal with resource planning. Well, here, the main resource is not so much people but money and time (P4).

To conclude, as for developing the organisation towards desired practices, the need to make necessary changes and include as many team members as possible was well acknowledged, but including families, local communities, or the wider network of other schools was not emphasised. At the same time, many theories state the need to develop partnerships beyond the school [24,32] and include powerful external forces like parents, community, and corporate connections so that they would not turn into disturbing forces [39]. As productive relationships with families and local communities and networking have been pointed out in theoretical concepts, it would be wise to address this aspect more in future development plans for schools. One challenge set in the Estonian Lifelong strategy that has
not been met was building better networking and cooperation between local schools [2]. There seems to be a lack of meaningfulness in this respect, as confirmed by the results of the current survey. It might be explained that, being used to a lot of autonomy, the school leaders do not feel the necessity for connecting to a wider community.

Building collaborative culture and developing distributed leadership have been emphasised by leaders to encourage teachers to reach their potential through sharing leadership [26]. This is in accordance with earlier research that says a collaborative approach helps to be prepared to cope with unpredictable changes [32,33]. For example, a study found that collaborative practices and distributed leadership played a significant role in shifting to distance learning [34]. However, researchers have drawn attention to principals’ concerns about engaging teachers in decision-making [37]. As found in research by Oppi et al. (2020) [39], principals often do not have the necessary skills to effectively support teacher initiative.

4.1.4. Improvement of the Instructional Programme

School leaders described teachers as professionals who keep themselves up to date with the instructional programme of their subject. Providing instructional support to them did not seem to be a major aspect of their leadership work. The principals understood that they need to ensure that the overall teaching concept is enforced in the organisation—importantly, which values should be enforced in learning and teaching—but not intervene in the details. Two of the respondents explicitly emphasised that if they want to initiate a change or develop something in the teaching process, they have to have a justification for that and be persuasive in reasoning their idea.

An evidence-based approach to leadership was, without a doubt, claimed as something they follow in leadership. Students’ feedback on the learning process, school attendance, and well-being were key indicators for all school leaders when evaluating schools’ progress. Three main options were mentioned when talking about monitoring students’ learning and school improvement progress—internal evaluation, feedback surveys, and everyday observation. The internal evaluation throughout the period of the development plan, monitoring school improvement process and continuous self-evaluation through questionnaires, interviews, and statistical overview of different data were mentioned.

Principals emphasised that they take a great interest in the results of the Tallinn University school survey and feedback survey conducted by the Education and Youth Board and use these results as a valuable resource for planning future actions. They were considered a trusted source of information and were claimed to be useful—it is not grades, exam results, or Olympiad places that are important, but the ability of students to cope in a future life:

The purpose of learning is not to get 100 points on the national exam but to prepare students for life, and to cope with their life after school (P8).

Nevertheless, three of the principals stated that everyday observation and cognition are also useful sources of information. However, one of them also stressed the need for data to confirm these findings.

Respondents stated that teachers’ main focus needs to be on teaching, and buffering staff from distractions from their instructional work needed to be acknowledged. In doing that, two school leaders talked about preventing or removing unnecessary tasks from teachers’ workloads. Seven of them stated considering teachers’ instructional work and ongoing initiatives when choosing what to do and what not to do in school to keep the work duties manageable.

Staffing the instructional programme is a heated dispute in the Estonian education field. The shortage of teachers was interestingly not mentioned by respondents. It might be such a trivialised topic that it is no longer talked about. However, four of the school leaders pointed out that they had enough good candidates when staffing their new school teams. Interestingly, a survey that investigated the reasons for the shortage of teachers found that retirement is a relatively minor reason, and the two major reasons are teacher job
dissatisfaction and pursuing other jobs [60]. In that matter, practising supportive leadership and taking responsibility to create a pleasant working climate should be key factors.

To summarise the previous paragraphs and analyse principals’ responses about improving instructional programmes, it seems that teachers’ work overload is built into school life, and it needs to be addressed. Four of them mentioned that they put effort into finding out what people’s concerns are and trying to search for solutions. They all agreed that teachers’ overload needs to be more clearly analysed by leaders, including what can be expected from teachers and what cannot. Research on teacher overload gives a good overview of the most popular reasons given for excessive workload—non-teaching tasks, monitoring, assessment, recording, reporting, and accountability (MARRA), covering colleagues, government–school initiatives, and poor planning [61]. It seems to be important that teachers’ workloads are acknowledged, and then activities can be planned that will result in staff gladly contributing to the process and a positive work environment. Another finding was that state upper secondary school principals did not see improving instructional programmes at the subject level as their responsibility and were in agreement that teachers are professionals who can take it upon themselves. To build better action plans for teachers and principals for their work to support instructional decision-making, one recommended key factor might be monitoring different school data [32,33,62]. Using data for setting up academic missions or challenging goals is also useful to explain and monitor decisions [63]. In addition, research has shown that leadership is a group effort [38], so leaders need to engage teachers and support their work. As seen from a study about COVID-19, a leader’s knowledge of pedagogy mattered in the restructuring of teaching and learning at a critical time [31].

4.2. Provider Support to State Upper Secondary School Leaders from Principals’ Point of View

Analysing the question about state upper secondary school principals’ perceived support from their provider, findings showed state upper secondary school leaders’ positive attitude towards the state upper secondary school format and the state as a provider. Eight areas of advantages were expressed—well-formatted expectations, strong support, well-set vision and values, sharing know-how, supporting each other, pure upper secondary level, modern school environment, and not being a participant in local affairs.

As discussed for previous findings, the principal’s visions and directions were in accordance with the vision and mission of state upper secondary schools and upper secondary school reform. It might be taken as evidence of well-set and efficiently presented and communicated directions among state upper secondary school leaders but also wider society. A well-executed leadership practice on behalf of the state upper secondary school provider was found [8]. Previous research found that school leaders’ vision of the school was strongly bound to external contextual factors, for example, public expectations [7]. Also, Clarke and O’Donoghue (2017) [43] stated in their study that context plays a crucial role in how leadership strategies are implemented. Four of the school leaders talked about, on the one hand, having more courage to be innovative but, on the other hand, being responsible for being a promoter in the education field and fulfilling the expectations of the provider in that matter.

Well, we have the courage to do it because we are schools under the Ministry, so if the Ministry allows such a thing to be done, then it is easier for other local governments to go on that path of change because the state upper secondary schools in front of them are doing what the Ministry allows, what we still trust, and I think that this is where state upper secondary schools contribute to Estonian education (P1).

All the interviewees stressed appreciation for the competence and support of the provider, the Ministry of Education and Research. They mentioned good and quick access to resources (finances, training, feedback); strong and professional support in legal matters, public relationships, carrying out procurements, etc.; and well-functioning and newly renovated or built schools that offer comprehensive and modern learning and working environments. The support was not only mentioned in allocating resources but also in
developing principals to succeed in their work. As focused upon in Hargreaves and Fullan’s 2015 [25] book, there are complex aspects to support school leaders in their work. They stated that, when applying for the position, a value-based convergence appeared:

\[\ldots\text{this value system is already in place somewhere, or at least it has been formulated by the school principal, well, whether it has been formulated now, but at least there is an understanding of what kind of leaders are needed (P5).}\]

The support is continuous, and all the respondents expressed that they appreciate the professionally given and developing feedback from the provider and also authorisation for training and self-development plans [25].

If the employer sets high goals, then the employer must also make sure that its employees develop themselves (P7).

No less important was the fact that school leaders can concentrate on being leaders in the school and do not have to deal with administrative matters, as the management of the school building is organised elsewhere. Some other aspects of support mentioned in the findings were obtaining constructive feedback that helps them become better at their work, knowing that principals managing tasks and challenges is important to the provider, and that the ministry is also contributing to the school leaders’ success [25]. All this is considered valuable by state upper secondary school leaders to ensure their mental well-being.

Another significant support mechanism that all respondents pointed out was a well-performing state upper secondary school leaders’ network.

There’s a lot of spunk in it [state upper secondary school network]. That kind of discussion and that desire to go forward together and that’s pretty awesome. It’s very rewarding to be in a group like that (P4).

They stated that it is very important that there is no competition with one another. As stated in a recent study, it is important to reduce competition and increase collaboration within and between schools [44]. This understanding is supported by Greany and Higham (2018) [45], who say that networks can offer mutual support and advice, share resources and know-how, and create innovation. School leaders in the present study talked about obtaining good information and advice and full support during difficult moments and how they protect each other’s backs. All that was seen as a help to cope better as a leader.

One more strength respondents talked about was the school being purely upper secondary level.

It creates a possibility for a kind of school culture which then tries to be brought into pure, pure upper secondary schools (P5).

The strength in that was seen in collaborating and setting the communication norms and expectations for young adults. Secondly, they claimed that a pure upper secondary school provides opportunities for a wider choice, especially in smaller places, because of the state upper secondary school concept. This, in turn, is an opportunity to design a learning pathway suitable for different students and ensure the high quality of education and their wish to continue their studies close to home. Six of the principals also mentioned the quality agreement between them and the provider. One of them stated it to be declaratory but still required building a common understanding of the criteria that need to be reached.

The final advantage of being a leader in a state upper secondary school is support for assertiveness and self-reliance [25] as principals are not part of the local governance, which was seen as a challenge in schools owned by local governments.

I felt how I was getting tired of the fact that in a municipality, the policymakers working in the local government council are, well, they’re all elected by the people of that community, and if something doesn’t go right in the school, they go to the municipality to complain, the municipality has to please their constituents and the school principal gets the outrage, that didn’t sit well with me at all (P1).
All the school leaders made this comparison between the two providers, even the ones that had not been working in local government-owned schools.

It might be said that the reform has been successful, at least from the perspective of creating an attractive working climate for leaders. As argued in the earlier study, being able to be guided according to district culture and structure is vital for principals’ success [27], but in the findings of this study, respondents pointed out that, as former school leaders of local government schools, they did not perceive this guidance. Although, as found in earlier research, a shared vision for schools under the same local education provider aims to achieve coherence at the local level, reduce competition, and increase collaboration within and between schools [44]. They noticed the difference in being administered by the Ministry of Education and Research, emphasising that they feel supported in terms of the necessary resources and obtaining constructive feedback that helps them to be better in their work. Another study by Eisenschmidt et al. (2021) [7] found that collective vision work at a local level is paid less attention by principals and, consequently, it would be an area of improvement in the Estonian education field.

5. Concluding Remarks and Further Perspectives

The aim of the research was to obtain an understanding of Estonian state upper secondary school leaders’ leadership dimensions and their perceived support from their providers. In comparison to successful leadership practices [8], the similarities to the state upper secondary school principals’ leadership practices are noticeable. The main findings of the study demonstrate that the most important dimension of leadership claimed by the principals was forging relationships with students and teachers. It was seen as a platform to set directions, steer changes, create a collaborative working environment, ensure teachers’ and students’ well-being, and develop people. Regarding the support provided by the provider, principals saw the strength in having trustworthy and supporting relationships with the provider and other schools in the state’s upper secondary school network. The school leaders’ perception towards the environment and working climate was stated to be supportive. An eloquent finding that the respondents highlighted was the difference between state and local municipality governments as school providers. Five of them had experience working in local government schools and had an experience of being in the turbulence of local politics.

The limitation of the paper is that from the theoretical perspective building a strong and collaborative network that would grow accountability and cooperation between different education organisations, for example, at the local level, was not addressed sufficiently in-depth as an interview question, considering that it is mentioned as a challenge in Education Strategy 2021–2035 [5]. As a limitation, this aspect was not explicitly addressed in the interview questions so it may have been overlooked. Another limitation might be that we did not ask about shortcomings or challenges of state upper secondary school principals in matters of school providers. During the interviews, the respondents talked spontaneously about advantages, but if asked more precisely about support, or lack of it, we might have gathered more information-neutral findings. Based on the data, we cannot present any results about the disadvantages of the state as a school provider.

Relying on the findings, some further research directions can be proposed. First, it would be advised to look from different perspectives, e.g., of teachers and students, to compare principals’ statements with the cognition of the school community. The findings provide state upper secondary school principals’ understanding and perception, while a study with different perspectives would provide richer information. For example, it seems that it has become a basic practice for school leaders to set and consistently recall the vision and goals of their school. In the future, it would be interesting to see how this aspect is perceived by others, how school teams have understood and committed to the directions, expectations, and how these are communicated to wider school and local communities.

Secondly, it is useful to investigate systematically the launching of educational reforms as these are accompanied by great public interest and the use of large financial resources.
Reorganising local school networks has been seen as an important aim in the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 [5], to reach the goal of creating regional education centres to provide new forms of learning and link general, vocational, and higher education and non-formal learning. In future research, it would be necessary to go deeper into studying the reasons for not putting enough pressure on building relationships with families and local and wider communities. Thirdly, in the Estonian education field, it has been debated that the state upper secondary schools have better access to resources, and that can be seen as unfair to local governments, which may be the case and should be looked at more closely.

Based on the findings of this research, some suggestions for future practical implications would be:

As stated in the theoretical frameworks, improving instructional programmes is one of the essential dimensions of principals’ leadership practices. Teacher autonomy is something highly valued and distinctive in Estonian education, and to reduce that would need strong arguments. But it should be analysed to what extent the leaders are aware of the successes and failures of teaching and learning. It would be useful for the principals to have a valid understanding of how teachers are carrying out instructional programmes and if there are shortcomings that need attention. School leaders should find the time and the means to put more effort into developing the work of curricula and syllabuses and provide necessary resources and support for staff in executing the curriculum.

Networking and building strong commitment with the local community and district schools could receive more attention from school leaders. This dimension should be better understood and more thoroughly planned. The network of state upper secondary schools is an inspiring example to follow, as all the principals highlighted it to be supportive, trustworthy, and advisory.

When trying to ensure sustainable and consistent quality of education in all schools in Estonia, the quality of local governments as school providers needs to become uniformly good so that all school leaders can feel safe and supported. Local daily politics should not be allowed to be a factor in making decisions about schools and principals. The Ministry of Education and Research, as a school provider, has set a sufficient standard, which is worth following by other private and local government school providers. The issue would probably need good development activities and programmes for improving the knowledge and leading capacities of the local government education specialists.

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