

Leadership Strategies for Improving Student Academic Performance in Senior High Schools in Ghana

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Abstract: *School improvement depends not only on identifying performance problems but also on determining which leadership strategies are most likely to strengthen teaching and learning in context. This study examined leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance at St. Michael's Senior High School in Birim North District, Ghana, and assessed the relative importance of school based improvement strategies identified by students. The study adopted a quantitative approach and an ex post facto design. A sample of 285 Form 2 students was selected from a population of 1,100 students through lottery sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .84 and analysed through frequencies, percentages, weighted mean indices, and standard deviations. The findings showed that the highest ranked improvement strategies were the organisation of educational field trips, provision of training for teachers and the headmaster, adequate supply of teaching and learning materials, and building cordial relationships among teachers, the headmaster, and students. Other relevant strategies included varying leadership style, respecting teachers' views in decision making, delegating responsibilities, training teachers to accept supervision, conflict resolution, and establishing a disciplinary committee. The study concludes that students perceive school improvement as a whole school leadership task rather than a narrow administrative function. Effective improvement strategies in this context combine instructional support, experiential learning, resource provision, positive relationships, participatory leadership, and behavioural order. The study contributes context specific evidence from Ghana and shows that academic improvement is most likely when school leaders combine accountability with support, resources, collaboration, and learner centred strategies.*

Keywords: school improvement, leadership strategies, academic performance, senior high school, Ghana, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Improving student academic performance remains one of the most urgent goals of school leadership. In many educational systems, school heads are expected not only to maintain order and administer school routines, but also

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to identify weak points in teaching and learning and introduce strategies that produce better outcomes. This expectation has become even stronger in contemporary education because academic performance is now closely tied to school accountability, public trust, student progression, and broader educational opportunity. Recent meta-analytic research shows that school leadership has a meaningful relationship with student achievement, though that relationship is rarely direct. It operates through teacher performance, school climate, instructional organisation, parental engagement, and wider school processes (Wu & Shen, 2022; Shen & Wu, 2025; Tan et al., 2024). This means that school improvement depends greatly on which strategies leaders choose and how those strategies reshape the daily life of the school.

School improvement is therefore not simply a matter of stronger control. It involves selecting practical interventions that improve teaching quality, student engagement, professional learning, resource use, relationships, and school culture. Recent work on leadership for learning suggests that academic gains are most sustainable when leadership is connected to teacher development, professional collaboration, and the conditions that support effective instruction (Papadakis et al., 2024; Persson et al., 2025). At the same time, research on school leader support shows that teachers are more likely to engage productively with improvement efforts when leadership provides constructive support, reasonable direction, and opportunities for professional growth (McTigue et al., 2024; Jensen et al., 2024). In this sense, improvement strategies need to be both organisational and human.

A particularly important insight from recent research is that school improvement is often a whole school process. Positive school climate, staff relationships, teacher commitment, and resource adequacy all matter for academic performance. A positive school climate has been shown to support learning opportunities, relationships, expectations, and school effectiveness (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025). Likewise, school leaders' data informed decision making can contribute to student learning when leaders use relevant evidence to guide school processes and target interventions more effectively (Cho, 2025). These findings suggest that effective leadership strategies should not be limited to one domain. They should address instruction, relationships, organisation, and the learning environment together.

The issue is especially important in Ghanaian secondary education, where academic performance in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination remains one of the most visible indicators of school quality. School leaders in Ghana operate under multiple demands, including academic accountability, staff management, policy compliance, student discipline, and resource constraints. Recent studies show that Ghanaian school leadership is shaped by institutional hierarchy, context sensitive practice, and increasing pressure to produce educational outcomes (Kyei Nuamah & Peng, 2023; Dare et al., 2024; Abonyi, 2026). In such settings, identifying practical leadership strategies for academic improvement is not just a theoretical issue. It is a pressing institutional necessity.

St. Michael's Senior High School in Birim North District provides an important context for examining this issue. The school had recorded relatively better performance from 2017 to 2020 but experienced a sharp decline in 2021. In such a context, a diagnosis of leadership behaviour alone is not sufficient. The more practical question is which strategies school leadership can use to improve academic performance. The study addresses that question by focusing on students' perceptions of the most important leadership based improvement strategies in the school.

Problem Statement

Many schools know that student academic performance is weak, but they do not always know which leadership actions are most likely to improve it. This is a serious problem because school improvement efforts can fail when they focus on administrative activity without identifying the practical strategies that matter most for teaching and learning. Recent research shows that school leadership improves student outcomes mainly through mediating processes such as teacher performance, professional collaboration, school climate, and instructional support

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(Papadakis et al., 2024; Persson et al., 2025; Shen & Wu, 2025). Yet many schools still struggle to translate this broad insight into specific, context appropriate actions.

At St. Michael's Senior High School, concern about this problem intensified when the school's WASSCE pass rate dropped sharply from 80.5% in 2020 to 48.3% in 2021, with 51.7% of candidates failing. This decline raised the question of how school leadership could respond more effectively to restore academic performance. Student perceptions from the school identified a range of strategies that they believed could improve achievement, including educational field trips, training for teachers and the headmaster, provision of teaching and learning materials, cordial relationships among teachers, students and the headmaster, variation in leadership style, delegation, conflict resolution, and stronger disciplinary structures. These proposed strategies point to a practical research problem about school improvement leadership in a resource constrained Ghanaian secondary school context.

This problem is significant because Ghanaian school leaders are increasingly expected to use evidence, support teachers, maintain discipline, allocate scarce resources, and improve student outcomes simultaneously. Although recent studies discuss school leadership in Ghana more broadly, there remains limited school specific evidence on how students perceive the relative importance of specific leadership strategies for academic improvement in senior high schools (Kyei Nuamah & Peng, 2023; Dare et al., 2024). The study addresses this gap by identifying leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance and examining their relative importance in one senior high school context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance at St. Michael's Senior High School in Birim North District, Ghana, and to examine the relative importance of school based improvement strategies such as training, supervision, resource provision, delegation, relationship building, and experiential learning.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance at St. Michael's Senior High School.
2. To examine the relative importance of school based improvement strategies such as training, supervision, resource provision, delegation, relationship building, and experiential learning.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What leadership strategies can improve students' academic performance at St. Michael's Senior High School?
2. What is the relative importance of the identified school based improvement strategies?

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it moves from diagnosis to action. While many school leadership studies identify relationships between leadership and student achievement, fewer studies focus directly on the practical strategies that stakeholders believe will improve performance in a specific school context. First, this study contributes context specific evidence from a Ghanaian senior high school. Second, it gives central attention to students' perceptions,

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which are often underused in school improvement research despite students' close experience of teaching, school climate, resources, and leadership outcomes. Third, it offers practical guidance for headmasters, district leaders, and policy actors seeking to improve academic performance through targeted school based strategies.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes conceptually by framing academic improvement as a multi strategy leadership process rather than a single leadership style issue. Empirically, it provides ranked evidence from student perceptions about the strategies most likely to improve academic performance in a Ghanaian senior high school. Practically, it highlights specific areas for intervention, including field trips, teacher and headmaster training, teaching and learning materials, relationship building, participatory leadership, delegation, supervision acceptance, conflict resolution, and disciplinary structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

School Improvement Leadership

School improvement leadership refers to the deliberate use of leadership actions to strengthen teaching, learning, school climate, and student outcomes. It is broader than routine administration because it centres on change, development, and academic progress. In contemporary educational research, school improvement leadership involves identifying areas of weakness, setting clear goals, organising improvement efforts, supporting staff, and aligning school processes around better student learning. School leaders therefore function not only as administrators, but also as improvement agents.

Improvement leadership is especially relevant in schools facing declining academic performance. In such contexts, leadership must move beyond maintaining order and focus on the concrete practices that can change learning conditions. These may include teacher development, improved feedback, stronger professional collaboration, better resource use, positive relationships, targeted interventions, and more responsive decision making. The key point is that improvement strategies are not random activities. They are purposeful actions designed to strengthen the pathways through which students learn.

Leadership Strategies

Leadership strategies are the practical courses of action that school leaders use to influence school improvement. In the study, the term includes both direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies affect teaching and learning more immediately, such as professional development, supervision, provision of instructional materials, and field based learning opportunities. Indirect strategies affect the wider conditions for school improvement, such as building cordial relationships, resolving conflict, respecting teachers' views, delegating responsibilities, and setting up structures that support discipline.

Leadership strategies in schools are often interdependent. A strategy such as teacher training may be less effective if there is no supportive school climate. Similarly, provision of materials may not improve learning if teachers are not motivated or if instructional planning is weak. Leadership strategies therefore need to be understood as part of a system rather than as isolated actions. This systemic perspective is important for school improvement because academic performance reflects the cumulative effect of multiple school processes.

Academic Performance Improvement

Academic performance improvement refers to the enhancement of student learning outcomes over time, usually reflected in better examination performance, stronger classroom achievement, improved engagement, and more

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consistent instructional quality. In school leadership studies, academic improvement is rarely interpreted as the result of one single cause. Rather, it is the outcome of changes in school processes that affect how students learn.

In senior high schools, academic improvement is often especially visible through external examination performance. Yet examination outcomes are shaped by prior conditions within the school. These include the quality of teaching, adequacy of materials, regularity of supervision, student engagement, school climate, discipline, and the coherence of school leadership. For this reason, academic improvement strategies must address both instructional and organisational issues.

Experiential Learning, Teacher Development, and School Climate as Improvement Domains

Three improvement domains are especially relevant to this study. The first is experiential learning. Educational field trips and other out of classroom learning opportunities can help students connect classroom knowledge with real world experience, improve engagement, and strengthen retention. Jones and Washko (2022) argue that well planned field trips improve student learning by making knowledge more meaningful, memorable, and experientially grounded.

The second domain is teacher development. Professional development, instructional support, and leader support can improve teachers' engagement, efficacy, and classroom practice. Research shows that teacher development becomes more effective when school leaders provide consistent support, encourage engagement with improvement processes, and sustain professional learning over time (McTigue et al., 2024; Jensen et al., 2024).

The third domain is school climate and relationships. Positive relationships among teachers, students, and school leaders contribute to better expectations, stronger engagement, better communication, and more stable school functioning. A positive school climate has been shown to support both academic performance and school effectiveness, especially through trust, collaboration, and shared educational purpose (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the indirect effects model of school leadership and the whole school improvement perspective.

The indirect effects model of school leadership holds that school leaders influence student achievement mainly through mediating school variables rather than by acting directly on students. These variables include teacher performance, professional culture, school climate, supervision, resource allocation, and parental engagement. Recent meta analytic work strongly supports this model, showing that school leadership affects student outcomes through teacher related and organisational pathways (Wu & Shen, 2022; Shen & Wu, 2025; Papadakis et al., 2024). This perspective is useful for the study because the strategies identified by students, such as training, materials, cordial relationships, delegation, and conflict resolution, all operate through school processes rather than through direct control of examination scores.

The whole school improvement perspective complements this model by emphasising that school improvement requires coordinated action across different parts of the institution. Improvement is not achieved through instructional supervision alone. It also depends on culture, relationships, staff development, organisational structures, and learning opportunities. Recent work on school climate and leadership practice shows that effective schools tend to combine pedagogical leadership, positive climate, high expectations, and collaborative relationships (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025; Cho, 2025). This perspective is especially relevant in the present context because the students' preferred strategies include both instructional and relational elements.

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Taken together, these perspectives suggest that leadership strategies improve academic performance when they strengthen the system of schooling as a whole. In practical terms, teacher training improves classroom practice, field trips improve engagement and understanding, instructional materials support lesson quality, cordial relationships improve climate and cooperation, delegation reduces leadership overload, conflict resolution stabilises professional culture, and disciplinary structures protect learning conditions.

Empirical Review

Recent empirical literature strongly supports the claim that school leadership matters for academic outcomes, but it also shows that the effect depends on the quality of the strategies used. Wu and Shen (2022), in a multivariate meta analysis, reported a significant positive relationship between principal leadership and student achievement and emphasised that educational context moderates this effect. Shen and Wu (2025) similarly found that principal leadership had positive direct and indirect relationships with student achievement, while also showing that the strength of the relationship varies depending on conceptual and methodological choices. These studies suggest that leadership matters, but practical school improvement depends on what leaders actually do.

Papadakis et al. (2024) provide a more specific insight by showing that leadership for learning influences student achievement through teacher performance. This is highly relevant to improvement strategies such as training, supervision acceptance, and provision of instructional support. Their findings suggest that academic performance is more likely to improve when school leaders adopt strategies that strengthen what teachers do in classrooms. Persson et al. (2025) also found that principal instructional leadership influences pupil achievement partly through teacher collaboration. This supports the view that relationship based and collaboration oriented strategies are not peripheral. They are part of the academic improvement pathway.

Teacher support and professional development also emerge strongly in the literature. McTigue et al. (2024) found that school leader support plays an important role in teacher engagement during intervention implementation. This suggests that improvement strategies are more likely to succeed when school leaders actively support teachers through periods of change. Jensen et al. (2024) likewise found that leader support is related to teacher self efficacy, classroom emotional climate, and students' literacy skills. Eryilmaz and Strietholt (2025) provide a more cautious complement to these findings. Using TIMSS data across many countries, they found that leadership support has a stronger relationship with teacher job satisfaction than with student achievement directly. This reinforces the point that leadership strategies often work through intermediate school processes.

Research also supports the importance of resource related strategies. Umuhoza and Uworwabayeho (2021) showed that instructional materials play a significant role in teaching and learning processes because they support understanding, participation, and teacher effectiveness. Although their study focused on mathematics teaching in Rwanda, the underlying principle is broadly relevant. Where materials are available and used effectively, teaching becomes more concrete and students can engage more actively with learning tasks.

The importance of experiential learning is highlighted in the field trip literature. Jones and Washko (2022) found that field trips improve student learning in higher education by making learning more engaging, authentic, and memorable. While their study was conducted outside the Ghanaian secondary context, the broader pedagogical principle is applicable. Well organised field trips can deepen understanding by connecting classroom instruction to real world experience. This helps explain why students in the study ranked educational field trips so highly as an academic improvement strategy.

School climate and relationships are another major theme. Delgado-Galindo et al. (2025) found that positive school climate is associated with better relationships, higher expectations, and stronger school effectiveness. Their study shows that a positive climate is not just a social preference. It is an educational asset. Similarly, Cho (2025) found

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that school context and school leaders' data informed decision making are linked to student learning outcomes. This is important because it suggests that school improvement strategies should be evidence informed and context sensitive rather than generic.

The Ghanaian literature further strengthens the relevance of this study. Kyei Nuamah and Peng (2023) show that high school principals in Ghana use leadership styles and practices in ways shaped by educational outcomes. Dare et al. (2024) demonstrate that school leadership in Ghana is deeply connected to administrative discourse and formal institutional expectations. Abonyi (2026) shows that leadership practices are also shaped by professional preparation and management training. Taken together, these studies suggest that school improvement in Ghana requires practical leadership strategies that fit local school realities.

Despite these advances, an important gap remains. Much of the current literature examines broad leadership constructs or multi school datasets. Fewer studies focus specifically on the concrete strategies that students in a particular school believe would improve academic performance. There is also limited school based evidence from Ghana that ranks such strategies in relation to one another. The study addresses that gap.

Research Gap

Three main gaps emerge from the literature. First, although school leadership has been linked repeatedly to student achievement, many studies do not move far enough into the practical question of which concrete leadership strategies matter most for improvement in a particular school context. Second, much recent work relies on principal or teacher reports, while students' views on improvement strategies remain less frequently examined. Third, in Ghana, empirical work on school leadership is growing, but there is still limited evidence that focuses directly on ranked leadership strategies for improving academic performance in senior high schools.

This study addresses these gaps by identifying and ranking leadership strategies that students perceive as most important for improving academic performance in a Ghanaian senior high school.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual logic of the study is that leadership strategies influence academic performance through several school improvement pathways. Experiential strategies, such as educational field trips, influence learning through engagement and real world application. Professional strategies, such as training for teachers and the headmaster and acceptance of supervision, influence teaching quality through teacher learning and responsiveness. Resource strategies, such as provision of teaching and learning materials, influence lesson effectiveness through instructional support. Relational strategies, such as building cordial relationships, respecting teachers' views, and resolving conflicts, influence climate and collaboration through stronger trust and communication. Organisational strategies, such as delegation and disciplinary structures, influence school functioning through improved management, accountability, and behavioural order. Academic performance is therefore understood as the downstream result of a coordinated set of leadership strategies.

METHODS

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative approach and an ex post facto design. This design was appropriate because the study sought to examine school conditions and leadership strategies already perceived by students within an existing school setting. The independent domain, leadership strategies for improvement, was not manipulated experimentally. Instead, the study described how students ranked different strategies in relation to academic improvement.

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The ex post facto approach was suitable because school based leadership processes unfold naturally and cannot ethically be assigned or controlled by the researcher. The design therefore allowed the study to investigate the phenomenon as it existed within the school environment.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at St. Michael's Senior High School in Birim North District of the Eastern Region of Ghana. The school was selected because of concern about academic performance and the need to understand how leadership could respond more effectively. As a senior high school, it offered a relevant setting for examining academic improvement strategies because examination outcomes at this level have high social and educational importance.

Population

The target population comprised 1,100 Form 2 students in the school. Form 2 students were considered appropriate for the study because they had spent enough time in the school to observe leadership practices and experience the teaching and learning environment. They were therefore in a good position to identify the kinds of strategies they believed could improve academic performance.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

A sample of 285 students was selected from the target population. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling approach commonly used in survey research. Lottery sampling was then employed to select the participants. Pieces of paper with numbers were folded and placed in a container, and students who picked the designated number were included in the sample. This procedure gave eligible students an equal chance of being selected.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument contained four sections. Section A captured demographic data. Section B focused on the leadership behaviour mostly used by the headmaster. Section C examined how the headmaster's leadership behaviour affected students' academic performance. The main analysis was based on Section D of the questionnaire, which examined leadership strategies for improving students' academic performance. The school's broader academic performance context was also used to interpret the findings.

Section D contained 10 items measuring students' perceptions of possible improvement strategies. These items included provision of training for teachers and the headmaster, adequate supply of teaching and learning materials, teacher acceptance of supervision, cordial relationships among teachers, the headmaster and students, variation in leadership style, conflict resolution, respect for teachers' views in decision making, delegation of responsibilities, organisation of educational field trips, and establishment of a disciplinary committee. The items were rated on a five point Likert type scale.

Measures and Variables

The central construct in this article was leadership strategies for academic improvement. This construct was operationalised through the 10 student rated strategy items in Section D of the questionnaire. These items were grouped analytically into five domains: experiential learning strategies, professional development strategies, resource provision strategies, relational strategies, and organisational strategies.

The first domain, experiential learning strategies, was represented mainly by educational field trips. The second domain, professional development strategies, included training for teachers and the headmaster and training teachers

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to accept supervision. The third domain, resource provision strategies, included the adequate supply of teaching and learning materials. The fourth domain, relational strategies, included building cordial relationships, respecting teachers' views, and resolving conflicts. The fifth domain, organisational strategies, included delegation of responsibilities, varying leadership style, and establishment of a disciplinary committee.

In the study, some reported item means exceeded the nominal upper limit of the five point response scale. Because the original raw response file was not available for recalculation, these values are treated in this article as reported weighted mean indices and are used mainly for comparative ranking rather than as literal arithmetic means.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validity checks before the main data collection. Face validity was assessed by peers within the researcher's academic programme, whose comments led to revisions in wording and presentation. Content validity was established through expert review by the research supervisor, who examined the relevance and adequacy of the items in relation to the study objectives.

A pilot test was conducted with 50 Form 2 students in a comparable senior high school context. These students were not included in the main study. The pilot responses were analysed using SPSS, and the full questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .84. This indicates good internal consistency for the instrument.

Data Collection Procedure

Formal permission to conduct the study was obtained through an introductory letter from the Department of Education and subsequent approval from the school authorities. The researcher then visited the school on an agreed date and administered the questionnaire with support from teachers. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and guided on how to complete the instrument. The completed questionnaires were collected on the same day.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were employed because the objective was to identify and rank the leadership strategies that students perceived as most important for improving academic performance. Frequencies and percentages were used for demographic data, while weighted mean indices and standard deviations were used to summarise the strategy items.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, students were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality was maintained, and no identifying information was collected on the questionnaire. The data were used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS

School Academic Performance Context

The school's recent WASSCE trend provided the practical background for the study. Table 1 presents the performance pattern from 2017 to 2021.

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Table 1: *WASSCE Performance Trend at St. Michael's Senior High School, 2017 to 2021*

Year	Candidates Presented	Number Passed	Number Failed	% Passed	% Failed
2017	122	87	35	71.3	28.7
2018	139	106	33	76.3	23.7
2019	154	128	26	83.1	16.9
2020	267	215	52	80.5	19.5
2021	89	43	46	48.3	51.7

Note. The school recorded improvement up to 2019, remained relatively high in 2020, and then declined sharply in 2021.

The table shows that the school had achieved relatively stronger pass rates from 2017 to 2020 before experiencing a sharp decline in 2021. This decline created the immediate academic context within which students were asked to identify possible improvement strategies.

Respondent Profile

Table 2 presents the profile of the 285 students who participated in the study.

Table 2: *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	36
	Female	183	64
Age	14 and below	95	33
	15 to 17	156	55
	18 and above	34	12
Course of study	General Arts	95	33
	Home Economics	77	27
	Business	57	20
	Visual Arts	20	7
	Agriculture	13	5
	General Science	23	8

The respondents were drawn from different age groups, programmes, and both sexes, although female students formed the majority. The spread of respondents suggests that the data captured views from a range of students across the school.

Leadership Strategies for Improving Academic Performance

The first research question sought to identify the leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: *Leadership Strategies for Improving Students' Academic Performance*

Strategy item	Reported Weighted Mean Index	Standard Deviation	Rank
Educational field trips should be organised by the teachers with the help of the headmaster for students	6.84	1.44	1
Provision of training to teachers and the headmaster can help improve academic performance	6.67	1.43	2
Adequate supply of teaching and learning materials can contribute to improvement in academic performance	6.34	1.38	3
Building cordial relationships among teachers, the headmaster, and students can help improve academic performance	5.87	1.54	4
Headmaster should vary leadership style so as to encourage teachers to give their best during teaching	4.82	1.57	5
Views of teachers should be respected by the headmaster during decision making in the school	4.65	1.65	6
Headmaster should sometimes delegate responsibilities to some of the teachers	4.54	1.39	7
Teachers should be trained on the need to accept supervision by the headmaster	4.32	1.65	8
Headmaster should find effective strategies to resolve conflicts among teachers	4.21	1.35	9
Headmaster should set up a disciplinary committee to deal with indiscipline among students and teachers	4.18	1.21	10

Note. Reported item values are treated as weighted mean indices for comparative interpretation because some values exceed the nominal upper limit of the response scale.

The results show that the highest ranked strategy was the organisation of educational field trips. This was followed by training for teachers and the headmaster, adequate supply of teaching and learning materials, and building cordial relationships among teachers, the headmaster, and students. These four items stand out clearly above the rest and suggest that students associated academic improvement with a combination of experiential learning, teacher development, material support, and positive school climate.

The remaining strategies also received positive support, although at lower levels. Students considered it important for the headmaster to vary leadership style, respect teachers' views in decision making, delegate responsibilities, train teachers to accept supervision, resolve conflicts among teachers, and establish a disciplinary committee. These lower ranked items still matter because together they describe a broader organisational improvement agenda.

Relative Importance of the Improvement Strategies

The second research question focused on the relative importance of the identified strategies. The ranking in Table 3 suggests that students gave greater weight to strategies they believed would influence learning more directly and immediately. Educational field trips ranked first, indicating strong student belief in the value of learning beyond the classroom. Training for teachers and the headmaster ranked second, reflecting recognition that academic performance depends on the improvement of both instructional and leadership capacity. Adequate materials ranked third, showing that students understood the practical importance of classroom resources. Cordial relationships ranked fourth, indicating that students also valued climate and human relations as part of academic success.

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By contrast, the lower ranked strategies tended to be more organisational and managerial in character. Delegation, conflict resolution, supervision acceptance, and disciplinary committee structures were all seen as important, but less immediately central than field trips, training, materials, and relationships. This does not make them unimportant. Rather, it suggests that students saw academic improvement as beginning with the quality of learning experiences, support, and climate, and only then extending into formal management structures.

Summary of the Results

Two main conclusions emerge from the results. First, students identified a wide range of leadership strategies that could improve academic performance, covering experiential learning, professional development, resource provision, relationships, participation, supervision, delegation, conflict management, and discipline. Second, the relative importance of these strategies was not equal. Students placed the greatest emphasis on educational field trips, training, teaching and learning materials, and cordial relationships.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

The first major finding of the study is that students perceived educational field trips as the single most important leadership strategy for improving academic performance. This is a notable result because field trips are often seen as supplementary activities rather than as core academic improvement tools. In this study, however, students ranked them above all other strategies. This suggests that students valued learning experiences that move beyond classroom walls and connect theory to practical reality. In a school context where academic performance had declined sharply, this result implies that students believed learning needed to become more engaging, concrete, and memorable.

This interpretation is consistent with experiential learning thinking. Field trips can enhance attention, retention, and understanding by helping students encounter what they study in direct or applied ways. They may also break routine and stimulate renewed interest in learning. In the study, students appear to have viewed field trips not as recreational extras, but as academically meaningful interventions that could strengthen understanding and motivation.

The second major finding is that training for teachers and the headmaster ranked very highly. This is important because it shows that students recognised academic improvement as a capacity issue. They did not locate school improvement only in student effort. Instead, they believed that both teachers and the headmaster needed further development to support better learning outcomes. This suggests that students were sensitive to the quality of leadership and instruction and understood that improvement requires human development within the school.

The strong ranking of teaching and learning materials reinforces this point. Students clearly perceived that resources matter. In schools where basic materials are limited, even committed teachers may struggle to make lessons effective, interactive, and understandable. By ranking resource provision third, students indicated that academic improvement depends partly on equipping the classroom properly.

Another important finding is the high ranking of cordial relationships among teachers, the headmaster, and students. This suggests that students viewed school climate as a real academic issue. They did not separate academic performance from the quality of human relations in the school. A positive and cooperative environment was seen as something that could help students perform better. This is a particularly important insight because it frames school improvement not only as a technical matter of teaching, but also as a relational and cultural matter.

The lower ranked strategies add further depth to the interpretation. Students still valued varied leadership style, respect for teachers' views, delegation, supervision acceptance, conflict resolution, and disciplinary structures. These strategies may have ranked lower because their impact on students is less immediately visible than field trips,

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training, materials, and cordial relationships. Even so, they suggest that students understood academic performance as connected to leadership flexibility, teacher voice, distributed responsibility, staff cooperation, and behavioural order.

Overall, the findings show that students perceived school improvement as a whole school process. Academic performance was not understood merely as the result of classroom teaching in isolation. It was seen as the product of leadership, learning opportunities, resources, relationships, participation, and organisational stability.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings align strongly with recent literature showing that school leadership influences student outcomes through multiple school process pathways rather than through a single direct route. Wu and Shen (2022) and Shen and Wu (2025) both show that leadership affects achievement significantly but indirectly. The findings support this perspective by showing that students' preferred improvement strategies were not narrow command based actions. Instead, they involved capacity building, resources, climate, engagement, and organisational support.

The high ranking of training is consistent with research on teacher support and professional development. McTigue et al. (2024) found that school leader support plays an important role in teacher engagement during intervention implementation. Jensen et al. (2024) similarly linked leader support to teacher self efficacy and classroom emotional climate. These studies suggest that academic improvement depends partly on whether teachers are supported and developed. The study extends that argument by showing that students themselves recognise professional development as a critical improvement strategy.

The importance of field trips in the current findings is also supported by Jones and Washko (2022), who found that field trips improve student learning by making knowledge more authentic, meaningful, and memorable. Although their study was conducted in higher education, the basic pedagogical insight is relevant here. Students at St. Michael's Senior High School seem to have recognised the same benefit: learning becomes stronger when students can connect lessons to direct experience.

The resource dimension of the findings is consistent with Umuhoza and Uworwabayeho (2021), who found that instructional materials play an important role in supporting teaching and learning. In the study, students clearly perceived that materials were not optional extras, but part of the core infrastructure of academic improvement.

The importance of cordial relationships and school climate also aligns with Delgado-Galindo et al. (2025), who found that positive school climate is associated with better relationships, higher expectations, and stronger school effectiveness. In the study, students' high ranking of cordial relationships indicates that they saw academic performance as embedded in a supportive and cooperative school culture.

The lower ranked but still valued organisational strategies also fit recent leadership research. Papadakis et al. (2024) and Persson et al. (2025) both show that teacher performance and collaboration matter in the leadership to achievement pathway. Respecting teachers' views, delegating responsibilities, and resolving conflicts are all strategies that can strengthen collaboration and school functioning. Similarly, Cho (2025) shows that school leaders' data informed decision making is connected to student learning outcomes, reinforcing the idea that improvement depends on thoughtful, evidence informed strategy rather than generic administrative action.

In the Ghanaian context, the study complements Kyei Nuamah and Peng (2023), Dare et al. (2024), and Abonyi (2026), all of whom show that school leadership in Ghana is shaped by both formal expectations and contextual realities. The study adds a practical layer by identifying which strategies students in one school see as most important for academic improvement.

Theoretical Implications

The study supports the indirect effects model of school leadership by showing that students perceive academic improvement as the product of multiple mediating school conditions. The highest ranked strategies all affect teaching and learning through intermediate pathways. Field trips improve engagement and understanding. Training improves teacher and leadership capacity. Materials improve instructional delivery. Cordial relationships improve climate and cooperation. These are all indirect routes to better academic performance.

The findings also support the whole school improvement perspective. School improvement was not perceived as a single intervention problem. It was seen as a coordinated process requiring experiential learning, professional development, resources, positive relationships, participatory leadership, delegation, conflict management, and discipline. This whole school pattern suggests that academic performance improves when leadership strategies work across the instructional, relational, and organisational life of the school.

A further theoretical implication is that student perceptions are valuable for identifying school improvement priorities. Students may not always frame leadership in technical language, but they experience the effects of school strategy directly through lessons, school climate, resources, relationships, and opportunities to learn. Their perceptions can therefore illuminate the practical routes through which leadership strategies become educationally meaningful.

Practical Implications

The study has several practical implications. First, school leaders should not limit improvement plans to administrative tightening alone. Students clearly value strategies that make learning more engaging, especially educational field trips. Schools should therefore consider structured experiential learning as part of academic improvement planning, not merely as an occasional add on.

Second, teacher and leadership training should be treated as a priority. The strong support for this strategy suggests that students notice the importance of teacher competence and leadership capacity. Continuous professional development for teachers and headmasters should therefore be part of school improvement planning.

Third, the findings show that teaching and learning materials remain foundational. School leaders and district authorities need to prioritise the provision and proper use of essential instructional materials if they want to improve academic performance.

Fourth, relationship building matters. A cordial and respectful school environment contributes to cooperation, motivation, and stability. Leaders should therefore invest intentionally in school climate, communication, and trust building among teachers, students, and school leadership.

Fifth, leadership should be more participatory and flexible. Respecting teachers' views, varying leadership style, and delegating responsibilities were all recognised as useful strategies. This suggests that rigid leadership may be less effective for school improvement than leadership that combines direction with participation.

Finally, organisational order still matters. Even though conflict resolution and disciplinary committees ranked lower, they remain relevant because they help protect the learning environment. School leaders should therefore combine supportive and developmental strategies with fair structures that manage conflict and indiscipline.

CONCLUSION

This study examined leadership strategies that can improve students' academic performance at St. Michael's Senior High School in Birim North District, Ghana. The findings showed that students identified a broad range of useful

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strategies, but placed the greatest emphasis on educational field trips, training for teachers and the headmaster, adequate supply of teaching and learning materials, and cordial relationships among teachers, students, and the headmaster.

The study concludes that academic improvement in senior high schools is best understood as a whole school leadership task. Students do not see school improvement as depending on one factor alone. They see it as depending on better learning opportunities, stronger professional capacity, improved resources, healthier relationships, more participatory leadership, and stronger organisational support. These findings contribute to school leadership research by showing that practical improvement strategies matter and that students can identify the pathways through which leadership becomes academically meaningful.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, it focused on a single senior high school, which limits direct generalisation to other schools. Second, the study relied on student perceptions and descriptive analysis rather than inferential modelling. Third, the reported item values required cautious treatment because some weighted mean indices exceeded the nominal upper limit of the response scale. Fourth, the study identified relative strategy importance but did not test the actual effectiveness of each strategy over time.

Future research should examine these leadership strategies across multiple senior high schools in Ghana and compare their effectiveness in different school contexts. Mixed methods studies would also be valuable, especially those combining student, teacher, and headmaster perspectives. Longitudinal research could further examine how the implementation of field trips, professional development, resource provision, and climate improvement strategies influences academic performance over time.

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