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**Leadership Styles of Secondary School Principals:
South African Cases**

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ABSTRACT This paper examines best basic leadership styles that can be used by principals to improve academic performance of learners in rural schools. Authors argue that basic leadership styles can have positive effects in learner performance. The study was conducted in best performing rural schools in the Eastern Cape Province. The belief is that poor performing schools can learn from successful schools. A phenomenological study with an interpretive-constructivism approach was conducted to establish basic leadership styles that can be used by rural school principals (which were purposely selected) to improve the academic performance of learners. Data collected through interviews were thematically analyzed and revealed that: democratic and autocratic leadership styles were used by successful rural secondary school principals; *laissez-faire* leadership style adversely affected culture of teaching and learning. It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education should spend more time and money on training principals on leadership skills.