7-1-2011

The Principals We Hire for Today's Schools: Voices of Superintendents

N. Yusof

Jason Mixon

Jane Irons

Edythe Kirk

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Academic Leadership Journal

Background and Literature Review

Role of the Principal

Over the past two decades, the role of a school principal has become extremely complex. Guthrie and Schuermann (2010) and Pulliam and Van Patten (2003) noted that in the current global context of the 21st century, educational institutions are being impacted as never before by economic, environmental, and political influences that have dramatically altered how education leaders operate. Undoubtedly, the most frequent role of today's principal is that of an instructional leader (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; and Smith & Piele, 2006). Smith and Piele (2006) described instructional leadership as the ability to lead the school community through personal knowledge of adult learning and based upon a clear school vision within current established state accountability mandates. Murphy (in Smith & Piele, 2006) confirmed that leadership was the variable that explained meeting ambitious achievement goals and that leadership was critical for nurturing troubled schools and leading during periods of transition.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify superintendents' perceptions of the characteristics of and abilities needed by successful principals in today's schools. In addition, identification of superintendents' concerns relative to the principals they hire was solicited.

The Study

This study was designed to investigate superintendents' perceptions of the principals they hire. The following topics from the framework for the study: design instruments, limitations, data collection, questions, sample characteristics, data analysis, findings, summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

Design, Instrument, and Limitations

A quasi-experimental basic research design using a cross-sectional survey method was selected for this study. The survey instrument was developed based upon a review of the literature covering leadership models, principal characteristics, priorities and program preparation components. Part one contained demographic information. Part two contained Likert-type items requiring responses to items on a continuum from least likely to most likely. Part three contained four open-ended questions in order to identify a greater range of responses. A panel of experts, including university professors and educational professionals from the field, provided face validity for the instrument.

Survey items (N=62) were scored on a 5-point Likert scale where higher ratings indicated a greater degree of comfort in hiring a principal. Survey responses tended to cluster around the higher range. The items were subjected to a principal components analysis to identify common strands. Items with

loadings below .50 were excluded from each strand. Five strands emerged accounting for 41% of the total variance in survey responses. Internal consistency reliability was determined using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. The five identified strands with internal reliability (Chronbach's alpha) included: leadership traits (.85), district size/preparation (.83), personal characteristics (.83), organization skills (.77), and priorities (.76).

A basic assumption underlying this study included the premise that the superintendent participants were actively involved in selecting and hiring principals for their school districts. The limitations of this study were commensurate with survey research methods. In this cross-sectional survey, data were collected at one point in time and reflected the experiences and biases of the respondents whose input was strictly voluntary.

Data Collection, Questions, and Sample Characteristics

The survey instrument was distributed through electronic mail to superintendents in the states of Washington, Arkansas, and Texas. These states were selected because the researchers had personal contacts in those states willing to assist with distribution. A major research question for this study addressed mean differences as follows:

Are there mean differences with respect to each of the five strands (dependent variables) as a function of the following independent variables: state of residence, gender, ethnic background, type of superintendent program, years of experience, number of students in the district, and highest degree obtained?

One hundred ninety-one superintendents responded to the survey. The majority of the respondents were from Texas with 78 (41%). Seventy superintendents (37%) responded from Washington, and 41 (22%) responded from Arkansas. One individual responded from Louisiana and one from Oklahoma. Seventy-four percent were male. Since 86% of the respondents were White, ethnicity was collapsed into White (N=164) and non-White (N=27). Ninety percent of the respondents graduated from traditional superintendent preparation programs. Years of experience was collapsed into three categories: 0-5 years (N=75, 39%), 6-10 years (N=72, 37%), and 11+ years (N=44, 23%). The number of students per district was collapsed into four categories: 1-429 (N=31, 16%), 430-979 (N=39, 20%), 980-2084 (N=44, 23%), and 2085+ (N=77, 40%). The highest degrees obtained were collapsed into master's (N=66, 34%), specialist (N=42, 21%), Ed.D. (N=68, 35%), and Ph.D. (N=15, 7%).

Data Analysis and Findings

Mean differences on total survey scores, as well as the five strands, were tested with one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) or t-tests for independent samples, as appropriate. Only significant differences were discussed. Gender, type of superintendent program, years of experience, number of students in the district, and highest degree obtained had similar response scores across all five strands and the total survey.

A t-test for independent samples revealed that ethnic background had a significant impact on District Size/Preparation scores, $t(189)=3.68$, $p<0.001$. Whites ($M=19.8$) showed a significantly lower degree of comfort than non-Whites ($M=23.5$). However, violations of homogeneity of variance assumption require cautious interpretations on such items as "Demonstrates ability to provide leadership in

suburban school districts" or "Received certification from a different state."

A t-test for independent samples showed that ethnic background had a significant impact on the Personal Characteristics Strand scores, $t(189)=3.32$, $p=0.001$. Whites ($M=31.4$) had significantly lower scores than non-Whites ($M=34.1$) on such items as "Appears to be practical, factual, and likes details" showing that Whites were less comfortable than non-Whites with higher ratings on these items.

An ANOVA revealed that state of residence had a significant impact on the Personal Characteristics Strand scores, $F(2,186)=9.54$, $p<0.001$. Post hoc analysis with Tukey's *Honestly Significant Test for Unequal Ns* showed that respondents from Washington ($M=30.2$) had significantly lower scores on this measure than respondents from Arkansas ($M=33.5$, $p<0.001$), and Texas (M-32.2, $p=0.001$). Personal Characteristics Strand scores from Arkansas and Texas respondents did not differ significantly from one another. Respondents from Washington reported a significantly lower degree of comfort than respondents from Arkansas and Texas on items assessing personal characteristics of new principal hires such as "Demonstrates determination – takes a firm stand," or "Demonstrates understanding of the basic requirements of the principal's position."

A t-test for independent samples showed that ethnic background had a significant impact on the Priorities Strand scores $t(189)=4.5$, $p<0.0001$. Whites ($M=17.3$) had significantly lower score ratings on this strand than non-Whites ($M=20.0$). For example, non-Whites rated such items on "the top priority of the principalship focuses on accountability" significantly higher than Whites.

None of the independent variables appeared to have an impact on the Leadership Trait or Organizational Skills strands. In general, ratings of items on these strands were relatively high.

Qualitative Results

Responses to the four open-ended statements provided rich information to supplement the quantitative findings. This data was analyzed through a data reduction method as recommended by Creswell (2007). Two or more of the researchers analyzed the data to establish reliability in the process and to agree on emerging categories. One-fourth or more of the participants agreed upon the category in order for it to be included in these findings. The qualitative findings are organized according to each specific research statement.

Open-Ended Questions with Analysis

1.   Briefly identify what you value most when hiring new principals.

Forty-seven of the 168 respondents addressed this statement. The following four categories were formulated: people-person, ethical leadership, instruction leadership, and personal experience.

People-person. The people-person category was described by participants as one that included individuals who focused on relationships and relationship building. The people-person understood the importance of the campus climate and the school community. The people-person could communicate with others and motivate followers. They were flexible, yet firm and led, not dictated. Specific situations were considered. The people-person was action oriented, not all talk, a person who could lead by modeling and articulate a vision. The people-person could address identified campus needs with a plan of action and multitask in a school environment.

Ethical leadership. Most of the respondents described ethical leadership in terms of high moral character, honesty, and integrity. In addition, the ethical leader was characterized as trustworthy, professional, and confident. The ethical leader was described as willing to work hard for school and district goals and who put in extra time as needed. The ethical leader made difficult decisions that were right for students, and there was transparency in their decision making. The ethical leader was willing to self-evaluate and work on what they did not know. They were described as life-long learners and "the real person behind the degrees and awards on the wall."

Instructional leadership. The instructional leader was described as one who embraced technology skills, was able to interpret school assessment data, and implement effective instructional programs based on data and research. The instructional leader was expected to be familiar with state testing standards and curriculum issues. The instructional leader understood diversity and poverty issues and demonstrated teaming skills focusing on student achievement and the mission of the district. The instructional leader demonstrated the ability to interact with parents in a positive manner and was able to influence faculty to focus on increasing student achievement. The instructional leader understood special education law and embraced diversity.

Personal experience. Many participants addressed personal experiences and rated practical field-based experiences above both coursework and simulations. Some would even require experience on a high performing campus. Understanding the complex nature of the principals' role was equated with experience. Experience with diverse learners and with special education laws was valued. Wise decision making and flexibility were associated with experience.

2.   Briefly explain your major concerns when hiring new principals.

Forty-two of the 165 respondents addressed this item. Three major categories emerged: the interview, background and experience, and leadership ability.

The interview. A major concern of many participants was a lack of good candidates. There was concern expressed about the unknown qualities regarding the candidate. One individual noted that "you can only get so much information out of an interview. Many times references are not factual, and you so seldom know the true person." Some superintendents expressed concern about interviewees knowing the answer for everything, but that after hiring a new principal, they would not be able to follow through or get along with people. To offset these concerns, some superintendents recommended a range of interview questions and development of an assessment tool to measure leadership style. Lack of the ability to verify statements on a resume or in the interview appeared a real concern for many.

Background and experience. Some superintendents remarked about lack of training or experience in small districts since they noted many new principals started out there, transferring to larger districts after obtaining some leadership experience. Many of the respondents remarked that they always checked references and several admitted "backdooring" an applicant by calling friends or acquaintances not on the applicant's reference list. The major concern expressed by applicants was a fear that the new principal would not meet the needs of the district or lacked ability to lead staff and students to excellence. One applicant wrote, "I do not want to get a weak one. I want to make sure they fit our district, and I want someone focused on improving every aspect of the school." Other concerns reflected the fear new principal hires were more managers than leaders and were too concerned about

day-to-day operations, rather than school improvement. Many respondents expressed concern about an inability to team build. One individual stated "they must be able to ride with the band."

Leadership ability. A major concern expressed by superintendent respondents was lack of ability to deal with difficult staff and parents. It was noted that superintendents expected principals to hold teachers accountable for teaching and learning and to address difficulties "head on." Inability to lead a change process was a concern, as well as complacency with poor staff performance. Some superintendents from Washington state expressed a concern that new principals were not prepared to work with union issues and they lacked budgeting knowledge.

3.   What recommendations would you offer principal preparation programs?

Thirty-seven of the 156 respondents addressed this question. Four categories were identified as recruitment, curriculum, internships, and mentorships.

Recruitment. Entrance requirements to a principal preparation program were viewed as problematic. Superintendents perceived that most preparation programs had an open-door admittance policy and that about anyone with a master's degree could be admitted. Superintendent respondents perceived a need to cull applicants before they entered a principal preparation program. The superintendents recommended consistent policies for admittance that screened applicants in the areas of work ethics, leadership styles, and research ability. One respondent noted that "candidate ability to listen, speak, and write in a professional manner always improves the quality and success of a preparation program."

Curriculum. Superintendent respondents stressed the importance of relationships and relationship building because they believed principals must establish relationships with teachers and the community where they work. Some respondents noted living in the community where they work was particularly important in smaller districts. It was noted by many of the respondents that principal preparation programs needed to align the requirement for hands-on-practice by including courses on leadership, action research, and the change process. It was also noted that there was a need to include ethics, budgeting, hiring and firing, and legal requirements governing special education and state accountability systems. It was suggested that principals needed to be prepared to serve all students regardless of race or socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, superintendents noted that principal candidates needed practice in decision making and strategic planning skills emphasizing interventions for increasing student achievement.

Internships. The superintendent respondents considered the internship as a critical framework for success. They recommended such strategies as shadowing, communication with school leaders, and opportunities to participate. In addition, superintendent respondents recommended placing candidates in as many real world instructional scenarios as possible, e.g., exposure to different size campuses and districts as well as different instructional levels, e.g., elementary, middle school, and high school. Superintendents explained that practical applications should be the focus of the internship. For example, they recommended participation and responsibility for sharing decision making and responsibility for a major event such as an assembly, or leading a curriculum committee.

Mentorships. The superintendent respondents acknowledged difficulties associated with formal mentorship for new principals but noted the advantages of a quality mentoring experience with professional leaders in the field. An internship was considered invaluable to the success of developing

principals. Superintendent respondents recommended that new principals should be provided an opportunity to work with practical problems, translate research into practice, multitask, and spend as much time as possible on the job with a good mentor.

4.   What would you like to tell us about principal preparation programs?

Thirty of the 122 respondents addressed this question. Three categories were identified: practice versus theory, program delivery, and program content.

Practice versus theory. Superintendent respondents recommended finding the "right" balance between practice and theory. It was noted that principal candidates needed opportunities to see theory in action in school settings. There should be an emphasis on the role of the principal as an instructional leader using job shadowing. It was noted that too much time was wasted on reading and summarizing what was read. More reflection, case studies, technology integration, data integration, research, and conflict resolution were recommended.

Program delivery. Superintendent respondents acknowledged a growing trend toward online delivery systems. Concern was expressed about totally online programs because face-to-face interaction was considered the most effective way to train on relationship building. A hybrid model that included lots of internship activity was considered essential. One respondent noted "it is easy to play facebook, but when you move into a principalship, almost all interaction is face-to-face." The superintendent respondents found cohort groups were invaluable for continued personal growth. Including resource people from the field in face-to-face classes was recommended. One superintendent wrote, "I have had success with candidates who have gone through traditional and non-traditional programs. I have not interviewed a candidate who has completed certification via 100% on-line delivery."

Program content. Superintendent respondents recommended teaching principal candidates more about how to work with teachers in general, how to work with new teachers, and how to work with negative teachers as well. Other areas of emphasis recommended for inclusion were stress management, decision making, listening skills, coaching skills, budgeting, and recognition of the major differences between small school and urban school settings.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The majority of the 190+ superintendents responding to a survey concerning who they hired as principals were White males who graduated from traditional preparation programs. About one-fourth reported having over 11 years' superintendent experience. The majority of these respondents represented school districts with over 2,085 students from the states of Texas, Washington, and Arkansas.

Ethnic background significantly impacted superintendents' ratings across the total survey and three strands in particular, preparation, personal characteristics, and priorities. For example, non-White responders rated such items as "Demonstrates ability to provide leadership in suburban school districts"; "Demonstrates determination – takes a firm stand"; or "The top priority of the principalship focuses on accountability" significantly higher than White respondents. These results might be explained when examining the characteristics of the samples as traditional White males with considerable superintendent experience who exercised caution when hiring principals.

State of residence appeared to be a significant predictor of the Personal Characteristics strand. Washington superintendents tended to have lower ratings (a lower reported degree of comfort) than either Texas or Arkansas superintendents regarding personal characteristics. Perhaps coming from a teacher union state led to higher emphasis on leadership skills for the Washington superintendents when examining personal characteristics of the principals they hired.

Gender, ethnic background, years of experience, type of preparation program, state of residence, size of district, and highest degree obtained appeared to have no impact on the Leadership Traits or Organizational Skills strands. Ratings across these strands tended to be relatively high suggesting a stable influence of state standards and federal mandates regarding curriculum and instruction for public schools and leadership preparation programs.

Superintendents identified ethical leadership, instructional leadership, personal experience and being a people-person as the most valuable characteristics of the principals they hired. Ethical leaders were valued for their professionalism and trustworthy decision making. Instructional leaders were expected to focus upon high student achievement, research, and data-based decisions. Personal experience with field-based applications was valued. The people-person was valued for having the ability to lead and motivate difficult teachers and parents.

The interview process was seen as a major concern because superintendents perceived that they were unable to get sufficient information in order to determine if the principal candidate could do the job and meet the needs of their district. Frustration with the lack of ability to verify resume statements or those made in an interview was apparent.

Superintendent respondents perceived screening of applicants for principal preparation programs as problematic. They recommended development of and adherence to strict procedures for entrance, as well as culling out those who did not perform early in the program. They noted that not "everyone" had the ability for leadership within the complexities of today's schools.

Internships and mentorships were the most highly valued training components for principal preparation. Practice applications were valued above theoretical presentations. Mentorships were perceived to provide a safe learning environment for new leaders.

Based upon the results of this study, the researchers would recommend continued emphasis upon relationships and collaboration with education professionals in the field. Within all types of principal preparation programs, jointly developed practical application projects rather than objective testing appeared warranted. In addition, an emphasis upon supervision and mentorship would appear beneficial for new principal candidates. Finally, we would recommend support for and supervision of substantial internships within principal preparation programs and continued support for established formal mentorships after principals have been hired to assist in the transition into a new work environment with a new culture and a new community. Further research between states who have teacher unions and those who do not may provide insight into differences when rating personal characteristics of the principals superintendents hire.

References

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd

ed.). Thousand Oaks,CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Guthrie, J. W., & Schuermann, P. J. (2010). *Successful school leadership: Planning politics, performance, and power.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2006). *The principalship: Vision to action.* Belmont, CA: Thompson*Wadsworth.

Pulliam, J. D., & Van Patten, J. J. (2003). *History of education in America* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Smith, S. C., & Piele, P. K. (2006). *School leadership: Handbook for excellence in student learning* (4th ed.) (Forward by Joseph Murphy). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]