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Leadership for the Long-haul: The Impact of Administrator Longevity on Student Achievement

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The average turnover of the principal position at public schools in the state of Texas is 3 ½ years (Fuller, Young, & Shoho, 2010). This fact raises a number of important questions. Perhaps the most important of which is also the simplest – So what? Does principal turnover matter? What is the impact of high principal turnover? Does this leadership shuffle lead to lower test scores? This study was conducted in order to find out.

Principals Matter

The role of the principal is important in creating a campus culture that is conducive to student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, 1994). While the principal's role is vital, it is also indirect (Borger, Lo, Oh, & Wahlberg, 1985; Bulach & Malone, 1994; Newman & Associates, 1996; Paredes & Frazer, 1992; Winter & Sweeney, 1994). This means that while the principal does not provide direct instruction to students, the principal does impact student success through the overall climate of the campus (Heck, 2007). Quality student performance in schools depends to a great extent on the quality of school leadership (Educational Research Service, 1998). Tashakkori and Taylor (2001) studied data from 9,987 teachers and 27,994 students concerning healthy school climates, and determined that school leadership was one of three major factors that influenced school climate. Other studies underscore the effects of a healthy school climate on positive student achievement (Bulach & Malone, 1990; Newman & Associates, 1996; Winter & Sweeney, 1994; Paredes & Frazer, 1992; Borger, Lo, Oh, & Walburg, 1985).

Principals are Leaving

The current status of the longevity of the school principal (aka retention) is a dismal story on Texas campuses. Young and Fuller (2009) examined principal turnover data on all Texas public school campuses from 1996 through 2008. These are some of their findings:

- 1) Less than 30 percent of newly hired high school principals stay at the same school at least five years

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- 2) The percentage of economically disadvantaged students in a school is a major factor in determining how long a newly hired principal will stay. Principals in high-poverty schools having shorter tenure and lower retention rates
- 3) More than 20 percent of newly hired secondary school principals in the lowest achieving schools or high-poverty schools leave after one year on the job
- 4) Principal retention is somewhat higher in suburban school districts where most students are white and not economically disadvantaged

In a survey of school superintendents conducted by Whitaker (2000), superintendents were asked to describe their perceptions related to principal turnover. Ninety percent of these superintendents responded that due to principal turnover, there was a moderate to extreme problem with a principal shortage. This indicates both a problem with principal turnover and a shortage of qualified replacements.

Similarly, in a study of both elementary and secondary principals in Arizona, school leaders were asked whether (and for how long) they planned to remain in their current position. Their responses reveal a grim picture of principal retention. Approximately one third of the participants indicated they were planning to retire; an equal number indicated a desire to remain in education, but no longer as a school principal; and only 30 percent of these principals indicated they desired to remain in their current position (Norton, 2003).

Why do Principals Leave?

While the cause for the high turnover (low retention) rate of principals is difficult to ascertain (Partlow, 2007), one indicator appears to be prominently displayed: the highest turnover rate is attributable to the most challenging situations on the campus (Young & Fuller, 2009). Kennedy (2000) noted five reasons for the lack of principal retention: 1) the demands of the job are shifting; 2) salary; 3) time; 4) a lack of parent and community support; and 5) a lack of respect. As working conditions become increasingly difficult and with pay lagging for highly qualified leaders, it is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to find and retain good principals (Adams, 1999; Portin & Shen, 1998; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998).

Does Principal Turnover Matter?

In order to find out if (and to what extent) principal longevity impacts student achievement, this study examined a sample of 105 elementary schools and 44 secondary schools in nine districts within the State of Texas. Care was taken to ensure a representative sample of urban, suburban, and rural schools from districts across the south central part of the state. Schools in the sample represented the entire range of socioeconomic status as identified by the National Center for Education Statistics Locale Codes. (NCES, 2007).

Student achievement was measured using both passing rates and commended performance rates in Reading and Math over a 3 year period (2007-2009). (Texas Education Agency, 2010). It should be noted that success on achievement tests is only

one small measure of overall student success. The authors acknowledge that there are many other success indicators such as graduation rates, college acceptance, attendance, SAT scores, ACT scores, and others.

Administrator longevity serves as one of the five independent variables in this study. It is important to include social and demographic variables within regression analyses on school climate factors so as to provide a more accurate picture of the factors contributing to school success (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). Accordingly, this research includes the following additional independent control variables: attendance rates; socioeconomic status; school size; and teacher experience, based on their previously demonstrated impact on school success (Bevans, Bradshaw, Miech & Leaf, 2007; Edmonds, 1979; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991).

Correlational analyses revealed that administrator longevity was, in fact, highly correlated with elementary level student success ($r=.195$, $p<.05$), and approached significance with secondary level student success ($r=.341$, $p=.06$).

Regression analysis was then employed. The first regression examined the effect of administrator longevity upon the dependent variable of elementary school success. Variables were entered into the regression model via simultaneous entry. The results formed a linear combination that explained a significant portion of the variance in elementary school success ($R=.790$, $p<.01$, with an adjusted R Square of .604). In other words, the model explained 60% of the variance in elementary school success. The results demonstrated that socioeconomic status ($\beta = -.672$, $p<.01$), percent of teachers with 0-5 years' experience ($\beta = -.145$, $p<.05$), and administrator longevity ($\beta = .227$, $p<.01$), each made statistically significant and independent contributions to the variance of the dependent variable.

The second regression analysis examined the effect of administrator longevity upon the dependent variable of secondary school success. Variables were entered into the regression model via simultaneous entry. The results formed a linear combination that explained a significant portion of the variance in school success ($R=.945$, $p<.01$, with an adjusted R Square of .872). The results showed that attendance ($\beta = .536$, $p<.01$), socioeconomic status ($\beta = -.557$, $p<.01$), school size ($\beta = -.370$, $p<.01$) and administrator longevity ($\beta = .375$, $p<.01$) each made statistically significant and independent contributions to the variance of the dependent variable.

Socioeconomic Status

It is no surprise that socioeconomic status showed up as a significant variable in this study. This confirms the findings of a number of previous school climate studies (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). In a recent report, the Education Trust (Conan, 2012) found that the wealth achievement gap has grown over the last 50 years. Without question, researchers and practitioners who are confronted with this information must make the decision to either accept this information

as normative, or explore ways as to how the challenges of educating students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can be overcome. In fact it is precisely this information that prompts principals to ask the question – what can be done to overcome the effect of socioeconomic status on student achievement?

Fortunately, there are campuses that perform at very high levels regardless of socioeconomic status. Douglas Reeves (2004) coined the phrase “90/90/90 campuses” to identify campuses that have at least 90% of their students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, at least 90% minority students, and student achievement in the 90th percentile on standardized tests. It is important to examine these campuses and find out what they are doing that leads to their success. Kearney, Herrington & Aguilar (2012) conducted a study of six 90/90/90 campuses in Texas. What they found was that one of the biggest factors common to 90/90/90/ campuses is principal longevity. By implication, policy makers wishing to close the wealth achievement gap may be well served to consider the role that increasing administrator longevity may play toward this end.

Attendance

The impact of student attendance upon secondary schools is clear in this study. As students attend more instructional days, their test scores increase. Perhaps that statement alone is not surprising. What may be more important for administrators to realize is the impact of relatively small increases in attendance. When all the secondary schools involved in this study were ranked from top to bottom based on their attendance rates, it was discovered that the top quartile of schools with highest attendance had an average attendance rate of 95.7%. Meanwhile, schools in the bottom quartile of attendance had an average attendance rate of 92.4%. Thus the difference between these groups was a mere 3.3%, and with an effect size of .536 ($p < .01$), attendance clearly makes a significant independent contribution to the variability in student scores on statewide achievement tests. It would appear that secondary schools in particular would be well served to maximize their attendance rates in order to capitalize on the potential yield these efforts can produce in regard to student achievement.

In Texas, as in many other states, funding is directly tied to WADA (weighted average daily attendance), which means that when students are absent, schools receive less money for education (Walsh, Kemerer, and Maniotis, 2010). By implication, then it is in the school’s own financial and educational interest to invest money in efforts that increase attendance. One strategy used commonly by attendance clerks is to have parent phone calls made on the same day of the child’s absence. If this contact is made early enough, there may be a chance to recapture this student before the student misses an entire day of instruction. Other strategies may include hiring an attendance specialist or community liaison who takes responsibility to coordinate parent contacts and home visits. This communicates that the school is aware of the absence, and cares about having the student back in school as quickly as possible. If there is a legitimate reason the student is absent, there may be an opportunity for home learning so that the child misses as little instruction as possible. The principal plays a vital role in creating a positive campus climate where students feel safe and want to come to school, but creating this positive campus climate

takes time. As administrator longevity is extended, the opportunity for the principal to make the campus feel like a place students want to be is extended as well.

Percentage of Teachers with 0-5 Years' Experience

An interesting statistic that the State of Texas makes available in its Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) is the percentage of teachers who have 0-5 years' experience. In this study, teachers with 0-5 years of experienced made a negative contribution ($\beta = -.145, p < .05$) to student success at the elementary school level. This confirms the notion that it takes a number of years for teachers to hone their craft. Ironically, one third of teachers will leave the profession within their first three years, and one half will leave teaching after five years on the job (NCTAF, 2003). Thus campus and central office administration may do well to consider teacher retention strategies so that they are able to retain quality teachers beyond the first 5 years of their careers.

Because the research indicates that so many educators are leaving the teaching profession entirely within their first 5 years, the competition for these teachers is not simply with other districts, it's with other industries. The way to compete with other industries may begin by providing a salary that is legitimately competitive in order to retain individuals who have the intellect and ability to succeed in a variety of professional roles. However, money is not the only useful tool in retaining quality teachers. Research indicates that employees are more likely to be loyal to their organization when they have a boss that they want to work for (Tope, 2003). The implication in regard to principal longevity is that if a teacher is hired by a principal, buys into that principal's vision for the campus, and then sees that leader leave, there is one less reason for the teacher to remain committed to that school. It seems logical to conclude that increasing principal longevity may have a direct effect on increasing teacher retention which in turn impacts growth in student achievement.

Administrator Longevity

Schools that experience a rapid turnover of principals report a lack of commitment to the organization, a lack of shared purpose, and an inability to attain meaningful change (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Teachers can become cynical and resistant to change because of the revolving door syndrome and the perception that the new leader was a servant to the school system rather than an advocate of the campus (Reynolds, White, Brayman, & Moore, 2008). When school leaders are promoted to the central office too quickly, it leads to the perception that the principal is more committed to career advancement than to the long-term welfare of the school and community (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003). This corresponds with the literature on organizational change. Researchers have estimated that school reform normally takes between five to seven years to implement (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). Similarly, Fullan (1991) posits that change takes at least six years at the secondary level. Thus the research indicates that change takes time and in Texas principals facing the greatest need to affect change often have the least amount of time in which to do so.

Administrator longevity provides an important point by which policy makers can impact school level success. This is an intriguing phenomenon, especially when the average principal tenure on a given campus in Texas is 3 ½ years (Fuller, Young, & Shoho, 2010). This incongruity provides an important consideration point for policy makers, superintendents and principal preparation programs. Principals are facing numerous challenges, such as heightened media attention, insufficient parent involvement, and increased job time requirements (Kennedy, 2000). Each of these contributes to job stress. Therefore the question must be asked as to what can be done to address the turnover rates of principals.

What Can be Done to Help Extend Principal Longevity?

Lovely (2004) has identified six actions that can be taken to improve the retention of quality school leaders that may help to make a school district a great place to work: 1) organize the school district as a learning community, 2) train supervisors to identify true talent, 3) do not be hesitant in building relationships with principals, 4) celebrate both milestones and successes, 5) maintain a clear focus, and 6) help principals experience a sense of achievement (Lovely, 2004). In other words, principals are people too. The same psychological drivers that influence teachers, students, parents and community members also impact principals. People want to feel valued and supported.

Webb & Norton (1999) have found that Peer Assisted Leadership Programs (PALs) have proven to be effective in enabling principals to learn from their colleagues, thus reducing the turnover rate for these principals. A similar strategy is the assignment of one veteran (and respected) principal within a district as the “lead principal,” who then acts as a non-evaluative mentor for her fellow administrators (Hoffman, 2004). Having an experienced school administrator as a mentor can be a great tool particularly in a profession that is prone to professional isolation. As the only principal on a campus, school leaders can often feel as if the weight of the world is on their shoulders. To contact a fellow principal (who is busy taking care of their own campus) may seem like admitting weakness. However, if the principal mentor is a retired school leader whose primary function now is to mentor current principals, they may be more able to have both the time and the credibility to engage in meaningful conversations in a safe environment.

Mentorship is not the only way to engage principals with one another. Peer accountability can be just as valuable. Professional learning communities allow principals to leverage their problem-solving strategies through a broader group of their peers (DuFour, 2002). Similarly, mentoring and coaching have been utilized in a variety of settings. These strategies have demonstrated results such as improved work-place relationships with colleagues, increased job satisfaction, greater commitment to the organization, and increased employee retention (Sketch, 2001). Regardless of the model chosen, it is important that principals not remain in isolation. Opportunities must be created to foster conversations and collegiality among principals so that they do not burn themselves out.

In regard to burn-out prevention, there have also been many models of work-integrated wellness that have been used in the private sector that have proven not only to be cost efficient, but also have reduced employee absenteeism and improved overall health of staff members (Devries, 2010; Haines, Davis, Rancour, Robinson, Neel-Wilson, & White, 2003; Wattles & Harris, 2003). Education may be well served to look to private industry for models that help reduce employee burnout. For example, Devries (2010) identified a number of risk factors which have been associated with lost productivity in employees, absenteeism, and overall job dissatisfaction. These are: poor eating, poor exercise, obesity, high stress, depression and high blood pressure (Devries, 2010). The idea of an exercise requirement has been tried successfully with college faculty and staff (Haines, Davis, Rancour, Robinson, Neel-Wilson & White, 2007). In this study, faculty members used pedometers to monitor walking progress. As employees exercise increased, so did their job satisfaction and workplace productivity. Employees who engage in self-care are not only more fit, they also appear to have increased job satisfaction. Wattles & Harris (2003) demonstrate that job productivity and morale are increased when employers implement formal wellness programs for their employees. Thus, the area of self-care or principal wellness may be fertile ground for future research if school districts and principal preparation programs should choose to attempt to extend the longevity of the principal position in the State of Texas.

Summary/Conclusion

This study began with a simple question – does principal turnover negatively impact student success? The answer is yes. By comparing the length of time in the Principalship with test scores on their corresponding campuses, we have demonstrated that in the aggregate, the longer a principal serves as leader of a campus, the better the student test scores on that campus are likely to be. Of course, principal longevity is not the only factor that impacts upon student success. Teacher experience, student attendance, and socioeconomic status all contributed significantly to student achievement for the schools within this study. We believe that each of these factors are interconnected with one another. We further believe that this research has implications for educational policy makers.

School board members, district superintendents, and other stakeholders presented with this data may determine that it is in their students' best interest to extend the tenure of their campus administrators. Increased pay is certainly one tool they can use to hold on to high performing principals, but it's not the only one. Just as students and teachers need positive feedback, principals do as well. Providing veteran principals as mentors and initiating opportunities for increased collegial relationships among campus leaders can reduce the feeling of isolation and increase principals' shared commitment to their campuses and their district. Principals feel so responsible for their teachers, staff, and students that they often forget to take care of themselves. It may be incumbent upon the district to step into this role and intentionally prioritize principal self-care. As this study has demonstrated, the longer a principal can stay on a campus, the higher the student achievement on that campus is likely to be.

More research is needed on how organizational and individual factors interact to create longer or shorter tenure among school leaders (Yee & Cuban, 1996). Complicating this research is the acknowledgement that every school is unique, having its own contextual factors that influence principal turnover (Kowalski, 1995). It is important therefore to understand the context within which principal turnover occurs (Fauske & Ogawa, 1987; Hart, 1993). It would be of great interest for future research to follow up with individual campuses to examine the factors which influence principal retention.

It is hoped that this research can serve to further validate the importance of having consistent leadership in place as one factor that promotes student achievement. As a greater understanding of principal turnover is achieved, principal preparation programs, school districts, and state agencies can begin to take steps to reduce principal turnover.

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