

Recruitment, Socialization, and Accountability of School Administrators in Two Urban School Districts

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Abstract: Due to the impending shortage of qualified candidates for administrator positions, school districts are faced with the challenge of attracting and preparing candidates for the administrator role. This empirical study focused on leadership succession planning and leadership development in response to meeting the demands of the social preoccupation of accountability.

Few areas of public policy in the last two decades have witnessed the flurry of reforms and innovations that have characterized K-12 public education. Spurred by a national concern about the quality of public education, among the trends that are having the most profound effect on the work of school administrators are the changing demographic characteristics of students and fiscal realities of schools. There are currently more special needs classrooms than ever as well as more classrooms that regularly include students whose first language is not English (Garcia, 2000). Funds for education have been dramatically reduced over the past number of years and many decisions about education have become centralized (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1999). Reform is being implemented in all areas of education simultaneously including curriculum, governance, structures, assessment, and accountability. Although the value and impact of the educational reform movement over the past two decades may be cause for debate, many researchers have asserted that one fact remains clear: the role of the school administrator has increased in its complexities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1999; Leithwood, Steinbach & Begley, 1992; Sackney, 1991).

At a time when school districts are re-examining every aspect of education in the search for more effective schools, many school districts report problems with finding qualified leaders for their schools. Due to the relatively low number of qualified candidates who pursue the administrator role, research has shown that many school districts are now looking beyond the education system in their quest for leaders (Gutheries & Saunders, 2001). A recent article in the *New York Times Supplement* (January, 2001) showed that the trend in recruitment practices for many school districts in the United States have moved towards considering the appointment of professionals from outside the realm of public education to lead their school districts. For example, Seattle has recently renewed its schools under the leadership of a retired Army General, while Atlanta has just recruited a retired Army Colonel as superintendent of operations in its district office; Los Angeles has turned to a former Colorado governor to lead its school district; Milwaukee employed a highly visible Social Service Director as superintendent; San Diego is relying on a former prosecuting attorney; Philadelphia schools have been led under the direction of an ordained minister while New York City has taken the leadership reins from respected and experienced educators and handed them to a securities industry lawyer. School systems everywhere are discovering that it is quite difficult to attract candidates to fill leadership positions, particularly at the school level. Across North America, there is an unusual shortage of qualified candidates applying for entry to the administrative recruitment pools for the critical school leadership roles-- vice-principals and principals. The research on effective schools clearly emphasizes the importance of the school administrator's role, both principal and vice-principal,

in school and student success (Abbott, 1994; Ashby & Krug, 1998; Daresh & Playko, 1992). The administrators' work can be characterized by brevity, fragmentation, and variety (Gregory, 2000).

Without strong school leaders, efforts to improve student achievement will falter (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1999). This idea that strong leaders are required is not new. In the 1960's, Harvard Scholar Ron Edmonds (1981) noted that effective schools tended to have effective administrators. An effective administrator can create a climate that fosters excellent teaching and learning, while the ineffective administrator can quickly hamper the progress of the most dedicated reformers (Edmonds, 1981). There are relatively few empirical studies at this time on leadership succession planning as it pertains to school and school district administration. However, among the studies done in this area, primarily concerning the dynamics among teachers and school administrators, the research literature and expert opinion literature confirms "leadership succession" as an organizational event of great potential importance to those who work in schools (Hart, 1993; MacMillan, 1996; Johnson, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to further explore and examine leadership succession planning practices in two school districts. Millions of dollars are invested into leadership development activities in school districts across the United States and Canada. Local school districts, state departments of education, as well as local and national foundations have provided funds for programs that are focused on retraining current leaders and preparing future leaders for our schools. While there is much activity, less is known about the impact of this investment.

Method

Two large Canadian urban school systems were selected for this study. Both districts have developed and implemented various strategies of leadership succession planning for the preparation of aspiring administrators as well as ongoing support structures for new and practicing administrators. The two districts were similar in size and began succession planning for administrators at approximately the same time due to the impending shortage of qualified candidates for administrative roles as a result of the current rate of retirements. A purposive sample selection process was used to ensure a cross section of educators for the study. Criteria for inclusion included administrative candidates, new and practicing vice-principals, new and practicing principals, and senior administrators at the district offices. Data collection methods included individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations and a review of documents. Twenty-two participants in District A were selected from the purposive sample of individuals who were currently enrolled in the administration preparation program (candidate), have already completed the administration preparation program (a vice-principal, a principal), or represented central office personnel. Twenty-one participants were selected from District B based on the same criteria. Data analysis began during data collection and gave direction for follow up in subsequent site visits. There were 18 interviews that were guided by the research questions. The data from the interviews and other data (documents, journals) were read and re-read, keeping track of themes, patterns, hunches, and ideas across cases (Merriam, 1998). All data were coded by listing themes and concepts that were evident in the data, or suggested in the conceptual framework.

Leadership Succession Planning: Findings

The findings of this study reveal a picture of the leadership succession planning processes and structures that two school districts currently have in place for the preparation of candidates to school administrator positions. First, a discussion on recruitment and selection processes is presented. This is followed by an overview of professional and organizational socialization processes. Finally, leadership succession in the context of accountability is discussed.

Recruitment and Selection of School Administrators

In both District A and District B, consideration was given to how the position demands, expectations, and responsibilities of school administrators have changed before launching what many senior administrators referred to as “appropriate” recruitment and selection processes. Many administrative candidates were at a stage in their careers where they were comfortable in their instructional practices and wanted to have influence on a broader scale. Yet, others were less experienced as classroom teachers but had been recognized by their principals or area superintendents as potential school administrators. While personnel in District A continued to seek ways to improve their recruitment practices, District B personnel had a structured procedure in place. In District B there was a “project” team in place that was responsible for arranging all recruitment activities. In District A and District B only internal candidates were recruited, trained and promoted throughout the ranks of teaching and administration. There was no written policy on external recruitment in District B. However, in District A there was a brief written protocol in place, but it was rarely needed. Usually, in District A and B, the tendency was to re-advertise rather than recruit and select external candidates. There were issues of time and contractual considerations that participants in both districts felt needed to be considered when planning the recruitment and selection process. More time for mentoring was needed to help candidates prepare for the selection process as well as more time needed for practicing administrators to prepare to release their “mentee” to take on a new position. A few days to prepare was not considered adequate. In both districts it had been a recent practice to permit unqualified aspiring administrators to take positions as “interim” vice-principals. There were stipulations attached to these agreements that involved consultation between the district office and the Teachers Federations as well as the Ontario College of Teachers. These two organizations had to give approval accordingly.

Professional and Organizational Socialization of Administrators

Both districts offered similar professional development and training activities to aspiring and practicing administrators that ranged from formal activities such as training programs, deliberate mentoring and job-shadowing to informal activities such as administrator in-services, dialoguing, networking, study groups, relationship building with subordinates and superordinates, learning about work settings and discussions on policies, procedures and priorities. Many administrators in District A felt they had just enough professional development time while some principals in District B felt they had too much, and that too much time away from school had caused a concern for them and their teaching staffs.

Newly appointed administrators made reference to the importance of opportunities to discuss entry strategies with other colleagues through professional development opportunities. One experienced principal who had been recently transferred indicated that he generally had positive entry experiences. Newly appointed principals with less experience indicated they had no entry strategy in place and were uncertain what to expect.

In District A and District B central office personnel were aware of the career patterns of teachers and dynamics of administration and used this knowledge to plan development activities.

In both districts it was the mentoring-protege and on-the-job experiences that participants considered to be the most valuable in preparing them for the administrator role. However, the same participants felt that there was inadequate time for the mentoring process to be fully successful. Many formal university courses were considered of little value to the administrator role. Although there was not a full consensus among participants these two socializing influences were noted by many participants as having little effect or impact on how well they performed their tasks as school administrators. However, some participants felt that the Principal's Qualifications Program was very helpful depending on the venue where the program was offered.

Leadership Development in the Context of Accountability

Across the two districts in this study, one commonality that was evident among participants was their understanding of the purpose and intention of their district's leadership succession planning. Participants referred to the importance of succession planning as a means to ensure quality instructional leadership preparation that could lead to student success. At the same time school administrators felt they were being held accountable by district office personnel to participate in the leadership succession planning activities. Despite the need and importance for succession planning in each district neither District A nor District B had any formal evaluation of the program in place.

Another commonality among all participants in this study across both districts was their shared understanding of the purpose of educational accountability. They believed that accountability was the best way to ensure the best course of action to support student learning and to justify the operation of schools. Furthermore, they believed that accountability in education systems meant that information must be made available to the public, to taxpayers and to parents in a form that allows them to have reasonable expectations of the system. Another commonality that existed across both districts was the lack of understanding of how the accountability system worked. A common statement across districts was "We are accountable for everything that happens in the school." A vice-principal added, "I'm not sure what I'm accountable for but I do know that if I do something wrong it's not long before I know about it." The participants did express concern that accountability as an educational issue was not discussed in more detail in either the Principal's Qualification's Program or the District Administration Preparation Program.

The perspectives varied among focus groups across districts concerning to whom they were held accountable, and how they were held accountable. A number of candidates and newly appointed vice-principals felt they were "accountable to everybody for everything done at school level," while other candidates and newly appointed vice-principals remained uncertain as to whom they were held accountable. Another issue among all participants, except for the senior administrators, was the lack of regular feedback on what their roles were as school administrators. They felt that if they were to be held accountable for doing something they must first be held accountable for knowing how to do it. For them, an accountability system must link standards, testing, professional development of administrators and teachers, reporting, and some form of consequences not only for failures but for successes as well. Without careful alignment of the component parts, testing alone was thought to have little effect. In summary, leadership development and leadership succession planning for both school districts involved professional development for school administrators whereby many of their professional needs were met.

Conclusion and Educational Implications

Based on the findings from this study, there are two specific implications for future research. These relate to clarifying the nature and function of leadership succession and a pervasive social preoccupation with accountability. These implications are outlined below.

Leadership Succession Success

The two school districts in this study are in the early stages of leadership succession planning. It is difficult to surmise at this time the overall outcomes of implementing these leadership succession activities. Finding relevant information requires searching under other labels and categories of literature such as “effective school districts” and “educational governance” and “transformational leadership” and “organizational learning.” In particular there is a need for research that clearly conveys the links between leadership succession and more generalized school district leadership practices. Leadership succession cannot be treated as a lone concept in isolation, but rather as a component of organizational governance and procedural structures within a school district.

Accountability

There is a considerable gap between the perceptions of academics and educational practitioners when it comes to the meanings associated with accountability. Compared to the consensus apparent across the conceptualizations of accountability presented by Kogan (1986), Wagner (1989) and Leithwood (1999) there seems to be a broad range of interpretations and ideologies reflected by practitioners in the field. The findings of this study indicate that senior school district administrators seem to articulate notions of accountability consistent with those of the literature. However, many of the other participants in the study – principals, vice principals, and aspiring administrators—revealed perspectives that were much more varied and scattered. Clearly there is a need for much more research and documentation of school district based leadership succession processes.

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