Leadership Succession for Tomorrow’s Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to elicit perspectives from teachers and educational leaders concerning leadership succession and the motivations/readiness of professionals to assume leadership roles in schools. The study involved electronic surveys and focus group involving teachers, in-school administrators, superintendents, directors and board chairs. In total, 838 educators participated. Implications of the perceptions of these educators for succession strategy are explored, and an argument made for a systematic plan for leadership succession in schools.

Keywords: school leadership; succession; teachers; principals; administrators

1. Introduction

Leadership is critical to school and system effectiveness and, more specifically, student success. There is a growing body of research pointing to the integral relationship between school leadership and student achievement. Marzano (2003) cited a variety of studies pointing to strong relationships between leadership and mission and goal clarity, overall school climate, the attitudes and classroom practices of teachers, the organization of curriculum and instruction, and students’ opportunity to learn. (p. 172).

More specifically, in a study drawing upon several bodies of knowledge, Waters, Marzano & McNulty (2003) conducted a quantitative analysis of 30 years of research (over 5000 studies), an exhaustive review of theoretical literature on leadership, and a bringing together of professional wisdom on school leadership. Those researchers demonstrated a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement. Leithwood and others (2004), following an in-depth and extensive analysis of the effects of leadership on student learning, concluded that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors influencing what student learn in school (accounting for about a quarter of the
More recently, Beteille et al. (2009) found that school leaders’ personnel management practices play a central role in school improvement. There can be no more powerful argument than the above for the devotion of time and resources to leadership sustainability and to thoughtful and proactive planning for leadership succession.

2. Challenges of School Leadership

PriceWaterhouseCoopers, in an extensive study on school leadership conducted for the U.K. Department of Education (2007), reported a clear sense among school leaders that their role has become more challenging and that the complexity and range of tasks they are required to perform has increased greatly in recent years (p. V). This report documented evidence suggesting that many school leaders are struggling to meet all the demands currently being placed on them (p. V1). The report noted that, despite a widespread recognition across the sector that an essential role of school leaders is to promote and develop the quality teaching and learning in the school, many school leaders expressed their frustration that the current environment does not allow them to be as involved in this area as much as they would like.

The PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ report noted that some of the barriers to distributing leadership included the persistence of the ‘hero-head’ perception amongst heads themselves and their staff, coupled with parent and community expectations of an ever-present, ever-available head. (p. 1x)

The international literature on educational leadership suggests that the ubiquity of change, complexity of the role, level of remuneration, status of the profession, legal constraints, and impact on family life (writer’s emphasis) are now seen as negative features of the principalship (Caldwell, 2002). The impact of such developments upon the available leadership pool in school systems was identified by Phillips, Raham & Renihan (2003) in their review of international state of the field.

2.1 The Growing Succession problem

In a review of the responsibilities and issues in the school principalship across jurisdictions in Canada and internationally, Phillips, Raham & Renihan (2003) noted the impending shortages for the position across jurisdictions, due to large numbers of retirements and fewer applicants for the job. They reported, “the disparity between the rapidly expanding demands and the shrinking pool of qualified and willing candidates is almost universally sounding alarms for policymakers and practitioners.” (p.12).

Fink and Brayman (2006), in a Canadian study, attributed the shortage of qualified principals to the dual issues of the emphasis upon standards/standardization on one hand, and the aging baby boom generation on the other. These researchers argued that the most critical issue is not one of succession, but the limited autonomy that principals can exercise on behalf of their schools and communities.

Read (2012), in an Ontario study on preparedness for the vice principal’s role, joined the variety of researchers who identified leadership succession as a critical issue in school systems, attributing its emergence as a concern to retirements, the shortage of teachers entering administration, and administrators leaving the position, due to dissatisfaction or disillusionment with the job. Read (2012) cited rapid and deep changes that have been the forces for concomitant changes in what schools do, how they are operated and governed, and how teachers and school leaders meet their professional responsibilities.

The above issues also present serious challenges throughout the corporate world and among social services and governmental organizations. There is a growing body of literature that examines these issues and proposes alternative strategies for addressing them. Much of this literature is informative and readily applicable to succession issues experienced within the education system.
2.2 Rationale for Succession Planning

Perhaps the strongest argument for focused and concerted attention to leadership succession lies in its integral role in the sustainability of relevant and effective leadership throughout the organization in the longer term. In light of this point, it is hardly surprising that writers such as Hargreaves & Fink (2003, 2006) placed such heavy emphasis upon the nature of succession and the dynamics of succession planning in their discussions of leadership sustainability.

Rothwell (2005) argued that the continued survival and viability of the organization depends on having the right people in the right places at the right time to do the right things. He noted that when succession planning is ignored, job incumbents tend to identify and groom successors who are like themselves in appearance, background and values, thereby fostering a type of ‘bureaucratic kinship system.’ According to Cohn et al. (2005) organizations that fail to prioritize succession planning end up experiencing a steady attrition in talent or retaining people with outdated skills.

The resolution of these issues lies, in part, with school leadership incumbents. According to Hargreaves & Fink (2006), “one of the best ways to secure successful succession is to spread and stretch leadership across people now, not just in the future, to distribute and develop leadership so that successors will emerge more readily and take over more easily. Distributed leadership develops capacity in others, so they can become as gifted as those who lead them and can build on their achievements.” (p. 93).

Horne (2009) provided a pragmatic and useful rationale for succession management by highlighting its role in assisting organizations to answer five critical questions:

- Do we have enough qualified people to fill key positions now and in the next 3-5 years?
- Will we have a sufficient pool of qualified candidates ready to fill key positions in the next 5-10 years?
- Do we have diversity and inclusiveness in our leadership positions?
- Will we have continuity of leadership for key executive positions?
- How will we retain high-potential employees? (p.1).

Horne added that succession planning is not replacement planning: that jobs and organizations change too quickly to identify potential successors based on today’s criteria.

2.3 Succession Strategies

Numerous researchers have examined the impact of succession upon the cultural contexts of the workplace. Schein’s (2010) work on organizational culture is valuable in this regard, and it serves as a reminder that succession is change and, as such, has implications-many of them subtle, deep and complex-for the processes, relationships and strategies associated with the implementation of succession plans. For this reason, the types of questions suggested in the Maryland succession planning guide (2006) present a valuable focus for contemplation.

The work of Conger and Fulmer (2003) found, from an examination of the succession practices of companies, that those who were successful in developing deep and enduring bench-strength devoted energy to the integration of two practices: succession planning and leadership development (a focus on development and leadership in action) in order to create a sustainable process for managing the talent roster across their organizations. On a similar note, Salopek (2007) emphasized the need for succession planning to go further down in organizations in order to mine employee skills both deeper and across the organization. Salopek suggested four common properties of useful and effective succession management
programs: they are dynamic (are frequently reviewed and monitored); they are transparent; they are comprehensive and integrated with other talent management initiatives; and they are aligned with corporate strategy and objectives.

The leadership succession plan adopted by the state of Maryland (2006) is based upon a series of questions pertaining to five succession-related practices, namely: identification, development, Promotion, movement, and retention. In Canada, The Treasury Board of Canada (2002) developed a comprehensive guide to serve as a resource for organizations considering their own transition and succession strategies. The goal is leadership sustainability: to identify pools of leadership talent- not ‘heirs to specific positions.’ Mentorship as a succession strategy has received significant attention in leadership research, and there is a growing recognition as to its potential in educational organizations. Daresh & Playko (1993) pointed to research which suggests that school leadership is enhanced when clear, focused efforts are made to help novice school leaders through their first professional duties. Crow & Matthews (1998) advocated long-term, conscientious approaches to mentorship as important means of accomplishing this, and added that support and mentoring be a career-long experience.

Read (2012) sounded a warning that teachers tend to learn about the nature and issues of the in-school administrators’ roles through incidental observations and interactions, that might not accurately reflect the true nature of the role. She added that the leadership succession phenomenon requires careful recruitment, support and retention of persons who are well prepared and qualified for the challenges they will face as administrators. Read noted that, while both incidental and deliberate learning are important to the novice administrator, structured (deliberate) programs are more important for such role-specific situations as dealing with the police and social services.

3. Purpose, Research Design and Methods

The purpose of the study was to elicit perspectives from educational leaders at the school and the system levels of the provincial k-12 system, with a view to examining the issues surrounding leadership succession and the motivations/availability of well-qualified professionals to assume leadership roles. Most significantly, the goals were: to help the major partners in education to consider the types of infrastructure and support that can most effectively address school and system leadership needs in the coming years, to identify guiding principles for succession planning for schools, and to offer recommendations for future practice and policy development.

The design of this study involved three complementary activities: a) a survey of teachers, In-school administrators, (principals and vice-principals), superintendents of education, directors of education and board chairs; b) several focus groups (72 participants) of teachers, principals, superintendents and board chairs; and, c) an interpretive panel consisting of representatives from a variety of professional groups. The research activities undertaken in each of these areas are described in the sections that follow.

3.1 Surveys and Focus Groups

Surveys were designed to elicit ratings and commentaries on succession-related issues from each group, and included perceptions relating to the appeal of, and levels of interest in, school leadership positions, required skills and attributes, and perceptions as to succession processes and practices in schools and school systems. Part 1 of the instrument sought demographic data on position, gender, age and experience for each participant group. Questions in Part 2 gathered ratings of the importance of factors related to the appeal of in-school leadership on a 5-point Likert scale. In Part 3, participants were
asked to rate the importance of requisite skills and knowledge required for school leadership, and Part 4 elicited perceptions regarding succession processes in schools. Verbatim comments on these issues were also requested. Chronbach’s Alpha scores indicated overall reliabilities of .838, for teachers (n=160); .846 for school administrators (n=507); and .776 for superintendents (n=60).

Seven focus groups representing in-school administrators, teachers, superintendents, board chairs and Ministry professionals were selected for involvement in discussions about succession held in different areas of the province following the collection of survey data. These discussions were designed to provide elaboration and depth to the themes identified in the surveys. In the presentation of data throughout this report, mean scores from 5 point Likert scales were utilized for the quantitative survey data. The tables representing thematic analysis of qualitative data utilized percentages that represented the proportion of the total number of comments per item related to each theme.

### 3.3 The Participants

Responses to the survey and participation in focus groups are summarized in Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Administrators</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directors</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Chairs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry Personnel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>766</strong></td>
<td><strong>72</strong></td>
<td><strong>838</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 1, completed electronic surveys were received from 766 respondents (169 teachers, 507 in-school administrators, 60 superintendents, 16 directors and 14 board chairs). In addition, focus group information was shared in 7 focus groups by 72 professionals (27 teachers, 6 principals, 5 superintendents, 20 directors, 5 board chairs and 9 Ministry personnel).

The gender breakdown of the respondent groups, while fairly reflective of that of the broader population, did contrast somewhat with the provincial figures. Among our respondents, females represented the larger proportion (60%) of the teacher group, while accounting for just over 40% of the in-school administrator and superintendent respondents. The in-school administrators were quite evenly distributed among the age 31-40 (30%), 41-50 (31%), and over 50 (36%) categories. Eighty eight percent of the superintendent respondents were in the 41-50 (40%) and over 50 (48%) categories.

Over 60% of the responding 169 teachers reported over 11 years total teaching experience. Teachers were strongly represented in the older categories, with 43% of them reporting a total teaching experience of 16 years or more. Fifteen percent of the teacher group were in the 1-5 years experience category. More than 60% of the in-school administrator respondents had less than 10 years of administrative experience. Sixty six percent of the in-school administrators group identified themselves as principals, while 34% reported holding a vice/assistantship position.
When these data were examined according to type of school, vice principals represented a larger proportion among respondents from high schools (43%) than from elementary and k-12 schools (35%). In terms of gender, 37% of the female school administrators, as opposed to 32% of male administrators, identified themselves as vice-principals. Elementary schools were most strongly represented among teacher and administrator groups. High schools constituted the workplace for 24% of the teachers and 17% of the administrators.

4. Findings

Data are reported according to the level of teacher aspiration to leadership positions, the skills and knowledge they require, perceptions as to how teacher skills and interest can be enhanced.

4.1 Teacher aspiration to in-school leadership positions

Teachers were asked two questions: a). Would you consider a position as a formal teacher leader (learning leader/catalyst teacher) in the next 5 years, the next 10 years, later than that, or never? b). Would you consider a position as principal or vice-principal of a school in the next 5 years, the next 10 years, later than that, or never?

It appeared from the survey data that teachers are more amenable to assuming some sort of school-level leadership than they have ever been. Over half (56%) of the teacher respondents indicated that they would consider a teacher leadership position in the next five years. In fact, 76% indicated that they would consider a teacher leader position some time in their career. When it came to their aspirations to formal leadership positions as principal or vice-principal, however, they were less interested (43% of them responded that they would never pursue such a post) though 54% of them indicated that they would consider such positions at some time. From the thematic analysis of the many comments offered on this issue, three qualities of the work stood out as rewards for people in these leadership positions (n=507): The opportunity to influence positive change was the single most frequently mentioned reward of the role, and was the focus of 17% of the verbatim comments made. The second and third rewards (Working and building relationships with new people, and seeing students and parents progress) accounted for 14% of the comments. Taken together, these three themes represented 45% of comments offered on this question. We asked teachers (n=169) and in-school administrators (n=507) what they believed to be the level of importance of selected reasons why in-school administration might be considered a desirable position. The opportunity to help children, the opportunity to influence change and make a difference, and the opportunity to positively influence school effectiveness emerged as the three most appealing qualities of the job for both teachers and administrators.

We also inquired about those factors that serve to discourage individuals from coming forward for in-school leadership positions. For teachers, the top four deterrents to in-school administration were, in order of frequency of mention: lack of support from central administration during change; perceived increases in the demands and workload placed upon principals; lack of time; and lack of agreement with current directions and philosophies. Principals identified the prevalence of a hegemonic culture that perpetuates the notions that they are only successful if they are ‘crazy busy’ and that busy people are the best example to follow. This reaction to the expectations that accompany their work was made in combination with their expressed concern that they have families and other dimensions of their lives that should not be compromised by their professional responsibilities. This tension was prevalent throughout the study. In the teachers’ focus groups, opinions about the desirability of leadership as an aspiration drew varied comments, and such factors as stage of career and family priorities were natural accompaniments to those opinions. Though some teachers were adamant in their conviction that they will never don the in-
school administrator’s mantle, many of them were still wrangling with the decision-making process involved.

4.2 Requisite Skills and Knowledge

The survey elicited perceptions of teachers and in-school administrators and directors as to the skills and knowledge required by school administrators. Data related to this area are summarized in Table 2. As the data illustrate, the perceptions of teachers, in-school administrators and directors reflected a high concurrence on most items across the three groups.

It is worth noting that the top five items related to human relations qualities: the ability to communicate and relate on an interpersonal level.

Table 2: Requisite Skills and Knowledge for Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills/Knowledge Item</th>
<th>Mean Rating 5-point scale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating effectively with staff</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging parents/community</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A caring Disposition</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with children and youth</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a sense of school vision</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving others in leadership</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for staff development</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of instructional strategies</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional supervision skills</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/organizing the school’s regular activities</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to provide leadership for cultural diversity</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing classroom assessment trends</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child development</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal knowledge of the principal’s role</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of budgeting</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps our groups of participants saw these qualities as foundational for critical skills in such areas as instructional leadership, supervision and conflict management that were identified as important. Respondents provided a wealth of explanation and elaboration on these priorities by way of verbatim comments contributed in the surveys and in focus groups.

We also asked leadership incumbents to reflect upon where they initially felt deficient in their roles. The major areas of perceived deficiency were, in order of frequency of mention: Instructional leadership and staff development, budgeting; school law; and conflict resolution. These four factors accounted for 67% of all the responses to this question. The volume of commentary among school administrators on the instructional leadership as an area of deficit warrants further comment. When this function (or set of functions) is considered in combination with related aspects of the role, such as knowledge of instructional strategies, and leadership for school and classroom assessment, it assumes even greater significance as an area requiring serious attention in school and system leadership professional planning, graduate programs and the roles of support agencies.
The most clear and pervasive message that echoed consistently throughout the perceptions described in this section was that communication and basic human relations skills comprise a critical prerequisite for successful in-school leadership. These, together with the establishment of effective and positive relationships with staff, parents, community and children emerged as central human relations priorities. However, certain knowledge areas emerged as priorities for consideration. In this respect, attention to instructional leadership skills, budgeting, law and conflict resolution were priorities in professional development and readiness plans among practicing and prospective administrators.

Though the practice has often been that the above qualities and skills are learned ‘on the job,’ there was a strong sense among respondents that we can do better. Mechanisms for their development require attention on the part of aspirants themselves (which tends to be a hit and miss affair) but also on the part of senior leaders in school systems and others with a professional interest in preparing professionals for school leadership.

4.3 Enhancing Leadership Skills and Interest: Building the Infrastructure

We asked teachers, in-school administrators, superintendents and directors for their perceptions as to how teacher interest in school leadership can be enhanced. Thematic analyses of their perceptions revealed numerous strategies. For teachers, the top four strategies for enhancing teacher interest were: promoting support for the role at the division level, increasing rewards associated with in-school leadership, initiating more leadership development and graduate study opportunities, and more respect for the time demands of the job. These four strategies accounted for 46% of all teacher comments made on this question.

Among in-school administrators, the availability of relevant leadership preparation programs was clearly the top priority. Other priorities included improved benefits, building shared leadership opportunities and developing leadership academies. The administrators, in their focus groups, discussed their responsibilities in preparing the next cycle of leaders, noting that one of the most effective ways to encourage people to consider leadership is to model the positive aspects of the job. The point was made that an important part of school and system leaders’ work is to develop the talent base through two concomitant activities: first, recognizing potential leaders within the context of their work, and second, providing support to their leadership development. Administrators made a call for experiential opportunities and hands-on activities for interested teachers at the school level, opportunities for acting positions, and opportunities for observing and working with, school leaders.

Across all groups, there was a strong realization that the enhancement of professional readiness for in-school leadership will occur, not merely through random, isolated activities, but through well-planned programs that incorporate thoughtful incorporation of initiatives that are experiential, informational, skill oriented, mentorship-based, and strategically designed in keeping with the vision and directions of schools and their broader systems.

5. Concluding Comments

The lack of availability of well-qualified applicants for the principalship/headship emerged in this study as the most critical succession and leadership sustainability issue. The introduction of teacher leadership initiatives within schools has the potential to provide impetus and valuable focus to initiatives designed to enhance the learning and professional environment of schools. It also seems to be having the impact of increasing the level of interest in school administration among school professionals, and this represents a logically sound argument for formalizing teacher leadership in schools. This is likely a major
explanation as to why the argument for distributed leadership has found favour in major school leadership succession studies, such as that conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers in the United Kingdom (2007). Issues relating to in-school administrator workload, a lack of time to meet the expectations of the vice-principals’ and principals’ roles, and a perceived lack of support provided by senior leadership, particularly in times of significant change, emerged from the data as key deterrents to teacher interest in these roles. These are issues that have consistently been raised in previous studies of school leadership succession. Questions related to the extent to which these issues are amenable to strategic action in succession plans are worthy of consideration.

In light of the above points, it is hardly surprising that the role image of in-school administration emerged from this study as an important foundational succession strategy. The appealing aspects of leadership roles, and the rewards and joys of the job (such as the opportunity to help children, the opportunity to influence change and make a difference, and the opportunity to positively influence school effectiveness) is valuable knowledge to convey to those pondering the possibilities of these roles. On a related point, we were surprised at the lack of knowledge, among school professionals, as to the nature of the work of in-school leaders. We would agree with the warning sounded by Read (2012) that teachers tend to learn about the nature of the in-school administrator’s role through incidental observations and interactions that might not accurately reflect the true nature of the role.

In this study, there was a greater emphasis upon work-life balance and the importance of family as critical aspects of career decisions than was the case in prior studies of in-school leadership. This has emerged as a central factor in teacher aspirations to in-school administration and, indeed, aspirations to leadership positions throughout the hierarchy.

Valuable insights into preparation and in-service needs were provided by the information shared by teachers and school administrators regarding their leadership deficiencies, needed skills and perceived strengths. This presents an opportunity for professional development centres and support agencies to gauge the continuing relevance of current delivery strategies and the substantive content of their offerings. The call for decentralized, community-based graduate programs, with attention to local/professional leadership contexts in their content and modes of delivery was strong in this study.

The above points, and others emerging from this study, represent topics for much-needed conversations across the education sector. The time is right for sector-wide discussion of matters (such as leadership succession and sustainability) that demand broader consideration. The growing research evidence pointing to the integral role of school leadership in student learning (Beteille, e al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003) constitutes in itself an eloquent argument for the elevation of leadership succession to sector-wide attention.

References


