

A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE
NCA-UNL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALIST PROGRAM

By

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A DISSERTATION

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A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE NCA-UNL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

SPECIALIST PROGRAM

BY

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A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE
NCA-UNL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALIST PROGRAM

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University of Nebraska, 2005

Advisor: Jody C. Isernhagen

The purpose of this study was to investigate school improvement specialists' perceptions of the effectiveness of the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program based upon their professional development and their ability to lead a school improvement process successfully. This program was developed through a partnership between the College of Education and Human Sciences of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI). A sequential explanatory mixed methods study was conducted. An online survey questionnaire was conducted that was based on the eight program outcomes of the program--needs of the 21st century students; change; mission and belief statements; total school improvement process; data; interventions and strategies; communication skills; and leadership skills.

Using both quantitative and qualitative designs, this researcher studied the perceptions of the school improvement specialists who had graduated and were certified as school improvement specialists. The online quantitative survey questionnaire captured the overall perceptions of the participants with the follow up qualitative interviews enriching and extending the results of the survey.

Data from the survey indicated strong support for the program with all mean scores rating above a 4 on the Likert scale range of 1 to 5 with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "A great deal." The nine qualitative interviews supported the analyses of the quantitative online questionnaire.

PREVIEW

In Memory of
Harry "Doc" Mills
Whose love and encouragement
provided the wind beneath my wings
to fulfill this dream.

and to
Gladys and Fritz
(My Mom and Dad)
who introduced me to the wonders of the library
and the quest for life-long learning

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Nothing is more important to America's future than teaching our children the skills they need to be successful. Every child must receive a quality education if American is to be a prosperous and hopeful country. Our rapidly changing global economy is creating new industries that compete for highly skilled workers from around the world, and young people in America must be able to compete for every job in the new economy. The success of every industry depends on the availability of an educated work force. Our national security is increasingly dependent upon attracting more students into technology and engineering careers. Improving our quality of life through medical breakthroughs and alternative fuel technologies requires cultivating the next generation of innovators and scientists. And our schools face the challenge of preparing the next generation of American citizens to govern in the 21st Century. The challenge to educate future Americans can be called the essential work of democracy. Making America safer, stronger, and better demands a world-class education system. (Bush 2004)

Tobergte and Curtis (2002) said, "American schools are said to be in crisis and failure is not an option" (p. 1). As America's schools focus on improving student achievement to meet the federal mandates of the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," they are faced with many challenges (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The need for accountability with fewer resources has increased the need for better-quality school improvement planning at all levels of the educational process. While many believe this focus on school improvement planning is new to education, research tells us that school improvement issues are not new (Kalusmeier, 2001).

Many efforts at school improvement have been tried since the early 1950's. The American public has continually sought measures for more and better education for the children of the United States with seemingly fewer resources allocated. Zirkel (2002) stated that in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that

desegregating our schools was important, and he noted that it was one of the first attempts to provide equal educational opportunities for all children. In his research, Kalusmeier (2001) explained that the federal government in 1965 moved to ensure equal educational opportunities for disadvantaged children by passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—a costly and controversial act at the time. He noted that this legislation was followed in the 1970’s by other federal programs. The 1970’s brought their own unique problems to education. Kalusmeier indicated that states were vigorously trying to solve educational problems spawned by the “Why Can’t Johnny Read” articles. He stated that by the 1980’s the federal government had moved to provide equity and non-discrimination in order to support the states’ efforts to improve the quality of education for all students. As all of these measures were being developed and implemented, the general public was slowly losing confidence in the educational system. Were all students receiving an equal and quality education? The 1990’s brought more legislation culminating in the landmark legislation known as “No Child Left Behind” signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. The legislation gave our schools and our country groundbreaking educational reform, based on the following ideals outlined by President Bush:

- Stronger accountability
- More freedom for states and communities
- Encouraging proven education methods
- More choices for parents.” (Bush, 2002)

It was the most controversial educational piece of legislation, since educators were forced into desegregating the neighborhood schools. Educators across the nation again had to meet the mandates of this legislation with limited resources.

Each state has tried to meet the mandates of NCLB in a variety of ways. Most states are using a “high stakes” test, which all students must pass in order to move to the next grade or to leave the public school system. A few states chose a more difficult path, designing an assessment system based on district-based criterion-referenced assessments that they feel better meet student achievement needs without a high stakes test (Roschewski, Gallagher, & Isernhagen, 2001). Regardless of the approach, a system for improving student achievement was needed to meet the mandates and still maintain quality educational opportunities for all students. Hargreaves (2003) expressed concern that educators should be cautious that they not create a two-tiered educational system where some students were given a quality education with many opportunities and benefits while others were not, depending on where they went to school. Colleges, universities, and school districts across the nation began examining and responding to all of the issues facing them, including building safe school cultures while providing quality education for all students.

One response to the tremendous problems facing educators across the nation was a higher education academic program developed as an online learning environment that would present a method of connecting theory and practice in the most practical of ways that directly impacted school improvement issues. This online higher education learning environment created a program of study that would train educators to lead a school

improvement process effectively. These practitioners, known as school improvement specialists, would learn the skills needed to accomplish that goal in their own educational environment using their own school or district's data.

The College of Education and Human Sciences (CEHS) of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) formed a partnership with the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI). The Department of Educational Administration (EDAD) took the lead role in planning with the NCA CASI. The College of Education and Human Sciences is a public teaching and research institution, within the greater University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dedicated to preparing teachers and administrators to meet the learning needs of students of all ages. The NCA CASI is a non-profit organization, accrediting over 9000 schools. NCA CASI's

vision is to assure the public of quality learning opportunities by holding the education profession to ever-higher standards. Through accreditation and related services, NCA CASI continuously improves the quality of education and challenges education entities to prepare each and every learner for success. (NCA CASI, 2003)

These two dynamic organizations joined forces to provide a higher education program that became known as the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program. This unique program prepared school and school district leaders to direct and facilitate a quality school improvement process. Participants developed their own plan for school improvement that fit their school or school district both in the public and private sector, as they navigated through the program. In order to meet the educational needs of learners all over the world, the program of study was delivered on-line through an interactive web-based approach allowing participants the opportunity to seek continuing higher

education while accommodating their demanding work and home lifestyles. The program of study did not disappoint UNL and NCA. It touched educators around the world, including Spain, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Japan, and in as many as 15 states in the United States. The program was initiated in 2000 and graduated four cohorts of school improvement specialists through 2004.

While many good things can be said for this program of study, it had a missing piece—a research based evaluation that would give all stakeholders an “authentic” picture of the program from the participants’ views. The partnership recognized that they needed to step back and look at the program based on a reliable, valid research study. Patton (1997) suggested, “Program evaluation is a systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (p. 23). Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) suggested that using a summative evaluation would allow the researcher to determine the merit, worth, and value of the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program to the graduates.

A summative evaluation is done after a program has been completed. It is usually completed for an external audience, which in this case was the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and NCA CASI. Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick (1997) stated that evaluations should be used to render judgments about the value of whatever is being evaluated.

Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) defined three terms—data, information, and knowledge—as crucial to an evaluation. Data are the facts and figures, or feedback that will be given to the stakeholders and participants in the study. Information is the patterns

found throughout the data that will give meaning to the evaluation. Finally, knowledge will provide the means to actions and decisions that may imply change or validation for the program of study. In this study the data would be collected in the form of a survey given to all graduates, known as school improvement specialists, of the four-course sequence. Next follow-up interviews were conducted with a select few. Finally, course work submitted throughout the courses by the school improvement specialist would be reviewed and coded if necessary. Together this would provide the data, information, and knowledge needed to provide a quality program evaluation for all stakeholders.

O'Dell and Grayson (1998) noted that "we are awash in information, but until people use it, it isn't knowledge" (p. 4). Collecting the necessary data and turning that data into knowledge would provide information to the partnership and interested audiences in the form of an evaluation. Because future cohorts will be impacted by the outcomes of this evaluation, the study maintained careful ethical considerations.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program. To accomplish this purpose, participants who had completed the program were asked to share their perceptions of how the program had enhanced their professional development and their ability to lead a school improvement process. The study was designed as a two-phase sequential, explanatory, mixed methods investigation.

Purpose of Phase I Quantitative Study

The purpose of Phase I quantitative study was to examine the school improvement specialists' perceptions of the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program's

outcomes effectiveness based upon their professional development and their ability to lead a school improvement process successfully. The researcher obtained statistical, quantitative results from an online survey.

Purpose of Phase II Qualitative Study

The purpose of Phase II qualitative study was to explore more deeply the perceptions of a group of participants with the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program to better understand their experiences and enrich the findings of the survey given to all course participants. The researcher hoped to understand clearly what participants perceived to be the consequences of completing the program. Follow-up semi-structured interviews with nine participants explored the survey results in more depth to determine the changes, if any, that the program of study had upon their level of expertise to implement and lead a successful school improvement process.

Research Questions

Phase I Quantitative Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do the school improvement specialists' perceptions of the course outcomes of the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program affect their professional lives and their ability to lead a school improvement process? Phase I used several sub-questions to address the perceptions of the participants. Through the survey questionnaire they were asked to reflect back on their experiences with the NCA-UNL School Improvement Specialist Program based on the course outcomes.

The sub-questions used to help answer the overarching question were: