

Nebraska High School Principal Beliefs About
Instructional Leadership

by

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Under the Supervision of Professor Jody Isernhagen

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Nebraska High School Principal Beliefs About
Instructional Leadership

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In Nebraska, the Department of Education (NDE) has implemented a Frameworks that describes the details of what principals should know and be able to do by identifying eight categories of expected duties, including those relating to the Principal as the Instructional Leader. This researcher sought to identify and better understand what Public High School Principals in Nebraska believe about their role as Instructional Leaders.

The components of Instructional Leadership in the NDE Frameworks include:

1. promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory,
2. ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards,
3. uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the curriculum program,
4. uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the instructional program, and
5. holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement across the curriculum.

This researcher created a survey instrument that was distributed to all Public High School Principals to identify what they believed about the importance of each of the five

components as well as self-assessing their own effectiveness in administering them. In addition, each participant was also asked to assess the effectiveness of their Graduate Training, Professional Development experiences, and feedback received from their immediate supervisor in their development as an Instructional Leader.

The findings of this Quantitative Survey Study revealed that respondents believed that the importance and effectiveness of their administrative skills and educational preparation in promoting effective teaching practices based on sound instructional theory has been well established. Other findings identified a lower level of confidence in the ability of the respondents to use multiple assessments in evaluating curriculum and instructional program. Similar findings related to educational preparation included Graduate Preparations, Professional Development, and Immediate Supervisor Feedback.

Recommendations from the study stated the need to collaborate with Graduate Programs, Professional Organizations, Educational Service Units, and other Regulatory Agencies to enhance programs that support the development of principals to be more effective in their roles as Instructional Leaders.

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Chapter One

Overview

Introduction

The principal's influence as instructional leader is well supported. The connection between the principal as an instructional leader and the public call for schools to better meet the needs of our students in a way that is competitive with the rest of the world requires that schools look deeply at how they can increase student achievement. One of the leading scholars in the education community regarding increasing student achievement is Bob Marzano, who is well-known for his role in meta-analysis of prior research on learning (Marzano, 1998). Marzano identified three levels of factors that promote student learning and achievement: (a) School Factors; (b) Teacher Factors; and (c) Student Factors (Marzano, 2003, p. 10). All three of these factors are touched in some way by the influence of the principal. Each factor contains required elements of supervision that helps to maintain a balance between accountability for performance as evidenced by student achievement and a school climate that nurtures relationships and development of individuals in their aspirations to reach their goals.

The intent of the school improvement process to increase student achievement is the implied purpose of all schooling. The value in examining the beliefs of the principal about instructional leadership is to acquire a better understanding of the principal's role for impacting student achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine Nebraska public high school principals' beliefs about Instructional Leadership and their self-determined effectiveness in their role as Instructional leaders.

Research Questions

1. What do Nebraska Public High School Principals believe about Instructional Leadership?
2. What do Nebraska Public High School Principals believe about their effectiveness as an Instructional Leader?
3. What do Nebraska Public High School Principals believe about their Instructional Leadership preparation?

This study will focus on what Nebraska Public High School Principal's beliefs are about Instructional Leadership as defined by the Nebraska Department of Education's (NDE) Frameworks for Teachers/Principals (2011). In the NDE Framework, the third component identifies the criteria expected of Nebraska Principals as Instructional Leaders. The Framework further identifies five (5) criterion that specify what Instructional Leadership expectations look like, which served as a resource from which the Research Questions were developed. Those example Indicators include: The Principal:

1. Promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory and professional collaboration to meet the learning needs of all students.
2. Ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards, includes effective instructional and assessment practices, and protects instructional time to maximize learning.
3. Supports the selection of instructional content that maximizes individual student learning and provides appropriate multiple perspectives.

4. Uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the curriculum and instructional program.
5. Assumes responsibility for the continued improvement of student learning within the school and holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement across the curriculum. (NDE, 2011, p. 7)

This researcher narrowed the scope of the five criterion to focus on the following parts of the criteria:

1. Promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory.
2. Ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards.
3. Uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the **curriculum** program.
4. Uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the **instructional** program.
5. Holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement across the curriculum.

The researcher chose these components of instructional leadership to examine because they were most closely aligned with 5 of the 21 responsibilities identified by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) that correlate with the example indicators of the Teacher/Principal Frameworks requirements for Nebraska Principals (NDE, 2011) in respect to instructional leadership. In their work, they identified the most important factors of principal responsibilities that influenced student achievement. The researcher compared the Marzano and Waters responsibilities to the Example Indicators of the NDE Frameworks to determine the best match for survey questions that would be the basis for the study.

Background

School Improvement is a widely accepted practice designed to improve student learning. In the Effective Schools literature (Lezotte, 1991), the value of instructional leadership was noted in first and second generation principals. Lezotte made it clear that leaders engaged in school improvement and who have “principals that act as instructional leaders and effectively and persistently communicate that role to the staff, parents, and students” (Lezotte, 1991, p. 4) improve student achievement. Every element of a building’s culture is shaped by the way that the principal interacts with students, staff, parents and the community with the thoughtful principal constantly pursuing the right combination of discipline, understanding, compassion, tough-mindedness, and accountability. The principal’s role in the school improvement process can and should be at the heart of how the faculty meets their mission and allows students to pursue their hopes and dreams.

What is the Principal’s Role in All of This?

The inherent responsibility of the principal as the person in charge of the school requires a closer look to better understand what principals do to become instructional leaders. Student achievement has become the rallying cry around which the school improvement efforts across the country have been centered. The literature from the effective schools movement gives credence to the characteristics of effective leaders and their importance in relation to student achievement (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Cawelti & Roberts, 1984). In schools where student achievement is high, the building principal possesses a vision of what a school can become (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). As this researcher thinks about the role of the principal in the mix of

accountability and building the culture of trust and relationships, his attention is attracted to what principals do as instructional leaders to address this shift in focus from schools where teaching is the focus to places where learning is the focus. In Nebraska renewed efforts to define our expectations of principals has been narrowed by the Standards for Principals found in the NDE Framework that fall within the following themes: (a) Vision for Learning, (b) Continuous School Improvement, (c) Instructional Leadership, (d) Culture for Learning, (e) Systems Management, (f) Staff Leadership, (g) Developing Relationship, and (h) Professional Ethics and Advocacy (NDE, 2011). It is the theme of Instructional Leadership that speaks very clearly to what the Nebraska Department of Education is expecting principals to do. Within that particular standard, the indicators of a principal who is an instructional leader included:

1. Promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory and professional collaboration to meet the learning needs of all students.
2. Ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards, includes effective instructional and assessment practices, and protects instructional time to maximize learning.
3. Supports the selection of instructional content that maximizes individual student learning and provides appropriate multiple perspectives.
4. Uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the curriculum and instructional program.
5. Assumes responsibility for the continued improvement of student learning within the school and holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement across the curriculum. (NDE, 2011, p. 7)

The role of the principal is unmistakable in its prominence to support the changes necessary for increased student achievement (Duke, 1982). But, the historical expectation of the principal as the person to turn to in solving the myriad of problems and circumstances that enter into the lives of students, teachers, and parents requires the execution of duties, actions, and time so demanding that allowing for instructional leadership from the principal's chair becomes a real challenge. The problem leads us to

the views of the principal in exploring those challenges while reflecting on the experiences that has allowed them to develop their instructional leadership abilities.

With leadership important to the success of the organization, it follows that the effectiveness and influence of the principal, the identified school leader, must be considered when administering the school's mission. A 1977 U.S. Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity (US Congress, 1970) identified the principal as the single most influential person in a school:

In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school. He or she is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. It is the principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become. The principal is the main link between the community and the school, and the way he or she performs in this capacity largely determines the attitude of parents and students about the school. If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place, if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching, if students are performing to the best of their ability, one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success. (p. 56)

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) broke down the responsibilities of the school leader (principal) into 21 different characteristics, of which one, Ideals and Beliefs, drives the need to explore what principals think about instructional leadership.

Definitions

Instructional Leader—

(a) Promotes teaching practices based on sound pedagogy, professional collaboration, and instructional interventions designed to meet the learning needs of all students; (b) Ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards, includes effective instructional and assessment practices, and protects instructional time to maximize learning; (c) Supports instructional content that reflects the perspectives of a diverse society; (d) Uses data from multiple assessments of student performance to evaluate the curriculum and instructional program; (e) Assumes responsibility for the continued improvement of student learning within the school and holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement within their assigned areas.” (NDE, 2011, p. 7)

School Improvement—“A systemic on-going process that guides planning, implementation, and evaluation and renewal of continuous school improvement activities to meet local and statewide goals and priorities.” The school improvement process focuses on improving student learning (NDE, 2012a).

Student Achievement Factors—“Clear, specific, and concrete actions that schools can take to dramatically increase effectiveness that are within the control of the school” (Hattie, 2012).

Influences Teacher Practice—Influencing teaching and learning refers to the ways school leaders have an effect on teachers as they work to improve learning. “A school leader’s influence on teaching and learning is derived from several leadership responsibilities including: Intellectual Stimulation; Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Monitoring/Evaluation; and Ideals/Beliefs” (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 42-43).

Beliefs—“(a) Well-defined values about schools, teaching, and learning; (b) Shared viewpoints about school, teaching, and learning with the staff; and (c) Demonstrated behaviors that are consistent with beliefs” (Marzano et al., 2005).

Professional Development—“The effects and effectiveness of activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge and skills of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (Guskey, 2000).

Evaluation—A system that provides feedback . . . the extent to which the leader monitors the effectiveness of school practices in terms of their impact on student achievement.

Assumptions

In the study this researcher will use information from the Nebraska School Activities Association (NSAA) to determine the targeted audience of public high school principals. It will be assumed that all public schools identified within the NSAA classifications have a high school principal with a defined role as an Instructional Leader. Additionally, it is assumed that each principal has his/her own supervisor that is responsible for providing feedback regarding the principal's performance as instructional leader. Principals will be limited by the scope of their undergraduate and graduate training as well as the commitment of their school district to provide professional development. It is also assumed that all of the responses received from principals are truthful and accurate.

Limitations

This researcher acknowledges that the study is limited by the personal beliefs of public high school principals currently serving in Nebraska. Those beliefs will be influenced by:

1. knowledge of principals about the Nebraska Frameworks for Principals, and
2. honesty of participant responses.

Additionally, the study is limited to a portion of the indicators named in the Teacher/Principal Framework (NDE, 2011). This limitation was determined so that the survey questions could allow principals to focus on single elements of the indicators as opposed to the multiple contexts of several indicators.

Delimitations

While the limitations acknowledge Nebraska Public High School Principals as the targeted audience, the study delimitations recognize other categories of principals that this researcher has chosen not to include. High School principals represent leadership at the exit level for students going into a world of post-secondary training, employment or other experiences in their lives, and the study will focus on the influences that principals have on those students. In addition, the study will not include data on the other seven responsibilities of Nebraska Principals (NDE, 2011) that are part of principal responsibilities.

Method

The researcher will examine the beliefs of public high school principals of Nebraska schools, utilizing a survey instrument focused upon the beliefs of principals in Nebraska high schools, and their educational preparation. The survey will be based on a portion of the elements of instructional leadership as defined by the Instructional Leadership component of the Nebraska Frameworks:

1. Promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory and professional collaboration to meet the learning needs of all students.
2. Ensures that the instructional program is aligned with content standards, includes effective instructional and assessment practices, and protects instructional time to maximize learning.
3. Supports the selection of instructional content that maximizes individual student learning and provides appropriate multiple perspectives.
4. Uses student performance data from multiple assessments to evaluate the curriculum and instructional program.
5. Assumes responsibility for the continued improvement of student learning within the school and holds staff accountable for the growth of student achievement across the curriculum. (NDE, 2011, p. 7)

Significance of the Study

Much time and effort is spent by the principal engaged in their role as instructional leader, driven by their beliefs in how to influence student achievement. A study of the beliefs of Nebraska public high school principals could provide insight into how to support principals in their development as instructional leaders. Analyzing the beliefs of principals about instructional leadership as they relate to their training, professional development and feedback could also provide significant support to principals as they look to improve their skills. Their beliefs could also play a role in formulating graduate studies and professional development in future years as we build support systems for principals to become better instructional leaders.

Summary

This study will focus on the beliefs of Nebraska public high school principals about Instructional Leadership. The researcher has prepared a survey to be distributed to all Nebraska public high school principals that allows them to identify their beliefs as well as the educational preparation to serve as an instructional leader. The survey will be based on the Instructional Leadership components of the NDE Frameworks (NDE, 2011). Results of the survey will be analyzed with the assistance of the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) Center located on the campus of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (<http://cehs.unl.edu/edpsych/near-center/>).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This literature review is structured to present the importance of an understanding of the components of the problem and their role in defining the study. The review is focused on the following components within the literature:

1. the evolution of the principal's leadership role, and
2. principal's role as instructional leader.

The Evolution of the Principal's Leadership Role

World leadership in schooling can be traced in America to the early 1900's when the development of secondary schools separated this country from its European counterparts in what was referred to as "the high school movement" (Goldin & Katz, 1997, p. 1). The European thought at the time regarded American efforts in secondary education as a waste of time, with the primary focus best spent on preparing students at an earlier age in preparation for life as opposed to furthering their education. The evolution of schooling is further characterized as an ongoing period of transformation as global markets became the world for which we prepare our students.

Most of the literature prior to the 1980's does not include discussion about the principal as the instructional leader. In the 60's and 70's most researchers used demographic criteria to discuss characteristics of principals such as age, race, size, sex, formal education and years of teaching experience (De Bevoise, 1984). While difficult to report any direct effects that the principal had on student achievement, an indirect effect could be noted in how the principal established processes that influenced the culture of the building (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). These processes could be traced to establishing

mission, ensuring opportunity to learn, improving communications and providing collaborative forums. In reviewing the literature between 1980 and 1995, Hallinger and Heck noted:

The general pattern of results drawn from this review supports the belief that principals exercise a measurable, though indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement. While this indirect effect is relatively small, it is statistically significant, and we assert, meaningful. (p. 186)

Some would suggest that the leader's greatest impact on the success of the organization is to establish a vision for the organization, calling this establishing a "Core Purpose as a Company's Reason for Being" (Collins & Porras, 1996). Collins and Porras contended that the purpose can never be obtained or fully fulfilled, but it acts as a guide for pursuing a goal or strategy. One such illustration points to the Core Purpose stated by Walmart: "To give ordinary folk the chance to buy the same things as rich people" (p. 11).

This sense of vision is referred to by Warrant Bennis as the first basic ingredient of leadership through a guiding vision. He contends the leader has "a clear idea of what he or she wants to do professionally and personally, and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failures" (Bennis, 2009, p. 29). In noting the difference between managing and leading Bennis stated:

- The manager administers; the leader innovates.
- The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
- The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
- The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.
- The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.
- The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon
- The manager imitates; the leader originates.
- The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.