

NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

By

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PREVIEW

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THE PERCEIVED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF NEBRASKA
PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2008

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The purpose of this mixed method study is to identify the professional development needs of Nebraska public school principal's. One hundred twenty-six public high principals from Nebraska schools participated in the study. Quantitative data was collected using a web-based survey sent to Nebraska public school principals. Qualitative data was obtained from interviews to explore why some public school principals appeared to be more aware of their professional development needs than others.

Building principals were positive in their feelings toward professional development. Principals perceived professional development improved student learning and the skills of the teachers they supervise. Building principals also agreed that they did not receive sufficient training about STARS or NCLB and indicated negative feelings about their understanding of the STARS and NCLB process.

Qualitative analysis supported the quantitative results. Interview data indicated the greater the experience of administrators, the easier it was for them to make decisions related to professional development, accountability, instructional supervision, classroom management, and student learning. All groups perceived that student learning was the focus of education in Nebraska.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

On January 8, 2002 President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which subsequently set in motion a different role for the federal government in public education. NCLB not only reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 but it also set forth a challenge for all public school educators, especially principals. Sunderman & Kim (2004) summarize NCLB, as “The No Child Left Behind Act is the most significant and controversial change in federal education policy since the federal government assumed a major role in American Education almost four decades ago” (p.1).

An issue faced by public school principals has been the struggles with the lack of control they have regarding student’s ability levels, student’s background, and the parental support of those who come to their schools. Dusseau, Hurst, & Bitter (2003) state, “The requirements of No Child Left Behind [NCLB] and many state mandated assessment plans are focused on student achievement. This has resulted in an intense focus on longitudinal measures and analysis” (p.1). It is going to be the skills and continued learning of the public school principal in each building that will develop the plan and study those longitudinal measures. Dusseau, Hurst, & Bitter (2003) express furthermore, that principals and their staffs must, “plan and implement interventions to address the needs, evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions, institutionalize those interventions that improve student performance” (p.3).

There has been a tremendous amount of prior research on the leadership practices of school administrators. Research in instructional leadership frequently recommends that principals integrate many needs and leadership strategies to be effective (Marks & Printy, 2003). There is also support for the concept that the quality of the principal's leadership is a major factor in determining whether the school moves forward to improve learning for students (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Many principals do perceive that they should be providing instructional leadership and that this is often something they cannot do because they have to manage many facets of their schools.

Irvin & White (2004) realize that “Principals are called on to lead their schools in the analysis of and the response to trends in various sources of data” (p. 21). Secondary school principals are called on to develop a vision and a plan to improve their schools to meet the demands of federal and state requirements with their data. So what leadership characteristics must a secondary school principal possess to be an effective change agent, staff development coordinator, and instructional leader in their respective buildings? Literature is out there regarding why professional development is important. However, there is little research on the identification of key professional development needs identified by public school principals themselves.

In the May 2004 issue of *Principal Leadership*, Jody Capelluti and Ken Nye (2004) identified eight characteristics of ineffective principals. Ineffective principal characteristics include, those who avoid conflict, don't follow through, don't listen, prefer style to substance, are not visible, hedge the truth, and measure their success by how the day went. So what characteristics do effective principals exhibit? Capelluti and

Nye (2001) summarize that an effective principal exhibits the exact opposite of those characteristics.

Anfara & Brown (2003) discusses the visionary leadership of the principalship as the key. “The visionary leader establishes goals, objectives, and group action. The visionary leader inspires, challenges, guides, and empowers” (p. 16). Many researchers have documented that vision and the ability to implement that vision is key in a principal’s ability to be a dynamic leader.

Many studies have failed to provide a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative inquiry of leadership needs, but have explored the work of leaders and how they do their work and how external factors such as NCLB and assessment processes have affected the principalship and their duties as school leaders in the era of federal and state accountability. This study will look at the changing behaviors of the secondary school principal in regards to accountability standards including the federal legislation, "NCLB" and state (STARS) performance initiatives. Sunderman & Kim states, “It (NCLB) imposes huge new duties on the states without providing state resources to cover many costs” (p.1).

Conducting a quantitative assessment will help establish a greater understanding of the issues and needs that must be balanced by principals to implement NCLB standards and state standards and assessments, while effectively employing management and leadership functions. By using qualitative measures this study will be able to receive the stories from principals that cannot be explained through the survey process. The demand of the principal to meet the needs of all groups in every school towards a level of achievement is something that is unprecedented.

Petko (2004) states in a report for the U.S. Department of Education (ED), "teacher quality is more closely related to student achievement than other factors such as class size, spending, and instructional materials" (p.1). In addition to the demands of assessments and accountability there is the challenge of the building principal to provide staff development and training to meet the needs of their students through their staff. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) asserts that the academic achievement of students is directly related to the competence of their teachers.

This understanding should benefit both educational and legislative groups furthering the dialogue that can lead to the development of future standards and the ongoing assessment of public school principals and their professional needs. These results will provide insight to the many areas that challenge building principal effectiveness, offer direction to manage daily tasks, and create a vision for the school's future.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed method study is to identify the professional development needs of public school building principals. An explanatory design will be used. Data will include collecting qualitative data after a quantitative phase to explain or follow up on the quantitative data in more depth. In the first quantitative phase of the study, a survey will be distributed to collect data from public school principals recognizing individual's professional development characteristics. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix A. This survey tool is similar to the Skills Assessment for Instructional Leaders (SAIL) research tool developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) through NASSP's web based technology. The

assessment tool could not be used due to data storage and confidentiality. However, a letter approving the use of questions on the assessment can be found in Appendix F. This survey uses demographic data and summative data to identify the challenges building principals face and the possible professional needs of building principals. After survey data are collected, qualitative interview data explored why some public school principals are more aware of their professional development needs than others. It also identified their limitations, and commendations for future professional development activities. The purpose for the exploratory follow-up was to help explain or build on initial quantitative results.

Following the survey process, the researcher interviewed three public school principals from each of the three levels identified as elementary, middle, and senior high school who completed the survey regarding their professional development opportunities and leadership training. After reviewing the data, qualitative questions will be developed so to understand better the challenges that all building principals from each identified level face in their professional development opportunities and needs. Questions may include items involving limitations, accessibility to conferences, leadership, accountability, and the size of school and/or district.

By being able to collect pre-assessment data from building principals through the comprehensive survey and follow it up with interviews of selected building principals, this study has the potential to benefit administrators in identifying their professional needs and to help develop the research in identifying professional development needs of public school principals.

Context/Background Statement

Accountability

NASSP (2006) released a position statement regarding building principals by stating, "In a world where principals face the difficulties of implementing high-stakes testing and greater accountability for student achievement, the complexity of the No Child Left Behind Act, budget constraints, and increased complexity of their jobs, the many roles and responsibilities of being a principal can overwhelm even the most positive and determined person" (p.2). Executive Directors of both the National Association of Elementary Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Ferrandino & Tirozzi (2004), released a document, stating, "Principals are quite used to complying with mandates and new laws. Our members know what's important, that they communicate clearly with staffs and parents about this new law and what they will be doing to make their schools better. They are guardians of their students' social and emotional welfare" (p.2).

Accountability makes sense, but greater support to help schools, teachers, administrators, and students to perform at higher levels must also be part of the agenda (Hamilton & Stark-Rentner, 2003). To be able to assess a principal's educational leadership skills as they relate to these demands can only help the principal and other in identifying and facilitating their growth as a professional.

In a time dominated by NCLB and state accountability standards, school leaders face new challenges of leading beyond accountability, Ferrandino & Tirozzi (2004) state, "Principals are the frontline interpreters for teachers, parents, and students" (p. 1). The new demands placed on public school principals have forced these leaders to identify

their needs of as it relates to student learning and the accountability measures. In his study of Nebraska high school principals' perceptions, Weichel (2002) surveyed 261 high school principals across the state. Results of the study yielded eight distinct themes:

1. "Principals perceived that standards would have little impact except in the areas of administration, stress, pressure, and time.
2. Principals' perceptions were similar regardless of gender, age, years as an administrator, amount of training, or school's free/reduced lunch percentage.
3. The perceptions of principals in Class A schools differed from those of principals in smaller schools.
4. Principals perceived the state standards, assessment, and accountability will create a greater demand on educators' time.
5. Principals perceived the state standards, assessment, and accountability movement will create added stress and pressure for educators.
6. Principals didn't appear convinced that the implementation of state standards will have a major impact on student learning.
7. Principals were in general agreement that future textbooks and materials purchases will be based on how well the content matches state or local content standards.
8. Principals with no training in standards/assessment/accountability had different views from those with varying degrees of training in the areas of student learning and principals' roles in interpreting accountability reports

and providing further instructional leadership due to standards”

(Hefflebower, 2005).

In a time dominated by NCLB, the leaders of teams and buildings face new challenges of leading beyond accountability. Irvin & White (2004) say “Principals won't be successful unless they combine the ability to see the big picture with the ability to model instructional and leadership strategies" (p 1). Critics have been badmouthing education research for at least 75 years, claiming it has little or no impact on school practices (Biddle & Saha, 2006).

Leadership

Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2003) provide evidence that effective leadership adds value to the impact of classroom and teacher practices. Awareness of the school and educational practices that impact student achievement is critical. Without effective leadership, there is less of a possibility that schools and districts will address these variables in a coherent and meaningful way. Hefflebower (2005) uses the research of Marzano and Lambert in her dissertation to explain that Marzano (2003), for one, concluded that, “Leadership is a necessary condition for effective reform relative to the school-level, teacher-level, and the student level” (p. 48). Lambert (2003) agreed that “educational leaders of today are overburdened, but that they must emphasize student achievement” (p. 49).

The role of the modern principal as the instructional leader has been re-defined by many groups. One such group is the International School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). In 1996 the ISLLC outlined the new role for principals by identifying the following characteristics principals need to possess in the current era:

- Have knowledge, beliefs, and skills that create a common shared vision and motivate others towards it.
- Direct the teaching and learning process
- Manage the operations of the school
- Unite the entire learning community
- Deal with legal and external forces
- Have ethics beyond reproach

Endorf (2005) uses current research on leadership in the era of accountability from Burns (1996), Fullan (2001), Cimbrisz (2002), Flett & Wallace (2002), Wirszyla (2002) in saying, “Regardless of changing job descriptions or increased workload, educational leadership is a key component of current school systems” (p.51). These responsibilities, while important, take time and energy away from a principal’s responsibility, instructional leadership (Endorf 2005).

Writing for ASCD, Schmoker (1996) identified one key to successful school improvement efforts. Leadership must recognize its most important function: that is to keep everyone’s eyes on the prize of improved student learning. Breaking Ranks (1996) states, “For the success of school reform, leadership must diffuse itself throughout the school community. The principal occupies the pivotal position as the leader of learners” (p. 21). To provide classroom teachers and themselves with the tools to be successful it takes a visionary leader to adapt to change and design the professional development he or she needs to be a successful leader.

Endorf (2005) uses the research of Marzano (2003) and Reeves (2004) in supported studies where “teamwork and unity were important elements to success in a

new era of education. Marzano identified three principles associated with strong leadership in contemporary public education” (p. 52). Leadership for change is most effective when carried out by a small group of educators who develop interpersonal relationships and respect with one another functioning as a strong cohesive force. Small groups should lead the change process, leadership teams should be decision-making bodies while showing respect for the large group, and interpersonal relationships remain essential to the functioning of a school. Reeves (2004) also addressed the current need for educational leadership in a time of increased accountability. Reeves (2004) concluded that, “it is a moral principle of leadership that no teacher or staff member will be more accountable than the leaders in the system” (p. 53).

Professional Development

In an interview of Ronald Heifetz by Dennis Sparks for the Journal of Staff Development, the one underlying theme that was never directly said, is the development of leaders and the skills needed to be adaptive and empower others to be innovative is a skill that evades most in leadership roles. Sparks (2002) interviewed Heifetz about his book "Leadership Without Easy Answers." Sparks asks Heifetz about leadership and the important issues society faces and what it will require leaders to be ready for. Heifetz responds, "Leadership would be an easy business if our organizations only had problems for which we already knew the solutions. Organizations have problems everyday for which they do in fact have the know-how and procedures to solve. But there are a whole host of problems they face that are not amenable to authoritative expertise” (p. 1).

So where does this training exist and what are the attributes of successful professional development for public school principals? What attitudes must change for

the principal to become a successful leader of learners? Goals 2000 identifies Principles of High-Quality Professional Development to develop the potential of not only individuals but also schools as a whole. "The mission of professional development is to prepare and support educators to help all students achieve to high standards of learning and development" (p. 2). "High-quality professional development should incorporate all of the principles stated below:

1. Focuses on teachers as central to student learning, yet includes all other members of the school community.
2. Focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement.
3. Respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community.
4. Reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership.
5. Enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, uses of technologies, and other essential elements in teaching to high standards.
6. Promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools.
7. Is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate that development.
8. Requires substantial time and other resources.
9. Is driven by a coherent long-term plan.

10. Is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning; and this assessment guides subsequent professional development efforts" (p. 1).

Dufour and Berkey (1995) say "Professional development for school principals also should communicate to teachers the importance of principals' continuous learning and clearly demonstrate that enhancing one's abilities is so vital that principals are willing to allocate time to increase their own knowledge and skills" (p. 5). Leadership development is often neglected. It is important that principals, teachers, and district administrators work to be instructional leaders and work to create and sustain high-performance cultures in their schools. School leaders must be able to develop strong communication skills and positive relationships to provide support and maintain the motivation of their staffs (Marzano, McNulty, & Waters, (2003). Sparks speaks about strong leadership correlating with high successful schools as well as leadership development improving teaching and learning throughout the school. Leadership is a valuable piece to the learning environment. Ferrandino & Tirozzi (2004) challenge, "Being a principal is one of education's most challenging and important jobs" (p. 2). The expectation of principals has dramatically changed over the past ten years. With this demand, many educators are turning their backs on the profession and interest has declined. Changes include the need to meet the changing demands such as, technology, demographic shifts, redefinitions of family, testing and accountability, violence, site-based management, etc. (Fenwick & Pierce, 2002). Fenwick and Pierce (2002) relate "These changes have resulted in a turning of the role of principal 90 degrees from everywhere" (p. 1). Foster, Loving, and Shumate (2000) are quoted in Fenwick and

Pierce (2002) as stating "Principals need continuous professional development opportunities to support their efforts toward school improvement and revitalize their commitment to creating and sustaining positive learning communities" (p. 1).

Much has been written in recent years about the importance of competent, caring teachers. It is also written that this cannot be reached unless there is a competent principal in the building. Professional development as a priority for principals is a challenge to most districts. The challenge many districts may face in the future is to fill the vacancies by retiring principals. If professional development is missing or given a back seat to other needs then we will have a generation of unprepared administrators leading schools across the country.

In the study conducted by the National Staff Development Council, "Principals' professional development should include deep knowledge of individual and organizational change processes and effective staff development strategies. Additionally, administrators should learn how to use data in planning for continuous improvement" (p. 5). Sparks (2000) states in his studies "the development of principals cannot continue to be the neglected stepchild of state and district professional development efforts. It must be standards focused, sustained, intellectually rigorous, and embedded in the principal's workday" (p. 2).

Research Questions

In order to best describe the impact of No Child Left Behind and state accountability initiatives on the leadership, management behaviors and professional needs of school principals, central quantitative and qualitative research questions were developed. The researchers asked;

1. Do public school principals in Nebraska know how federal and state accountability initiatives have changed their professional development needs in relation to their management and leadership styles?
2. What professional development is necessary for the development of knowledge and skills needed to be effective and efficient instructional leaders?
3. Are their limiting factors that determine professional development that is necessary for the development of knowledge and skills needed to be effective and efficient instructional leaders?

Method

This study used quantitative and qualitative measures to address the research questions stated. The mixed method design to be used is called “Explanatory Design.” Clark & Creswell (2007) in their book “Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research” explain that the Explanatory Design procedures starts with, “the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The first phase is followed by the subsequent collection and analysis of qualitative data. The second, qualitative phase of the study is designed so that it follows from (or connects to) the results of the first quantitative phase” (p. 72). This design is to be used when the researcher needs more data to expand on quantitative results. In this study the researcher will need more data to determine why some public school principals score better on their self-assessment.

This study involves a quantitative survey using some questions of the SAIL survey with permission from the National Association of Secondary Principals. A survey