

Through the Looking Glass: Comparing Superintendents' Preferred Principal Characteristics to ELCC and Texas Principal Standards

Scott Bailey, EdD
Associate Professor
Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, TX

Barbara Qualls, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, TX

Abstract

This study investigated the alignment between Texas superintendents' perceptions of the necessary professional characteristics of principals through the hiring process and the ELCC principal standards and the Texas principal certification standards. Texas superintendents were surveyed and interviewed to create a framework comparing their market-driven views with the standards guiding principal preparation. The study determined that superintendents often sought characteristics that lay just outside the domain of the formal standards, such as moral purpose, trustworthiness, and "fit." Incorporating the superintendents' views into principal preparation program planning has important implications for programs in terms of producing qualified, effective, marketable, and ultimately employable principal candidates.

Key Words

superintendent perceptions, principals, hiring standards, ELCC standards

Introduction

Principals do important work, work that directly impacts student achievement (Waters & Cameron, 2004) and, among all school-related factors, is second only to classroom instruction in its contribution to what students learn at school (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). That said, key responsibilities fall on either side of the practicing principal; namely, the preparation program that prepared him/her and the superintendent who hired him/her.

Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs) are tasked with producing principal candidates who have the knowledge and skills to be successful, and their work is guided by national and state-level standards that outline what successful principal candidates should know and be able to do. The work of the PPPs matters (Young, 2015).

Likewise, superintendents are tasked with choosing and hiring principals who will be successful in their local schools, tasked with decisions guided largely by their own experiences, their understandings of the needs of their communities and schools, and their savvy for judging candidates based on interviews and artifacts. Too, the role of the superintendent is central to a principal's success (Normore, 2004).

Objective

This exploratory study arose from one PPP's efforts to align coursework with the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) national program accreditation standards and the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) state standards for principal certification. Examining the sets of standards informed the PPP about what outside agencies determined were the critical

knowledge and skills for principals and provided direction for candidate training. What was missing, however, was the insight of the superintendents who are actually hiring these principal candidates. The PPP desired to travel "through the looking glass" to explore what is on the other side of the mirror, to determine what superintendents were looking for in principals. That reported insight would describe market demand for principal candidates, which would in turn inform application of standards alignment and curriculum objectives for PPPs.

The missing data piece, the superintendents' input, led to the research questions guiding this exploratory study:

- 1) What professional characteristics do superintendents seek in principal candidates?
- 2) Do the professional characteristics they seek align with the ELCC and SBEC standards?

Understanding how market demand aligns with accreditation and certification standards will inform the work of PPPs working to produce the most effective and viable principal candidates.

Significance

Exploring the vocabulary superintendents use when describing ideal principal characteristics yields insight into how those superintendents operationalize their constructed perceptions of principal effectiveness.

Understanding superintendents' views assists PPPs in developing a profile of an ideal candidate aligned with both the governing standards and superintendent perceptions, ultimately resulting in a more capable candidate, as well as one more likely to get hired.

Theoretical Framework

The underlying theoretical approach for this study involved a social constructivist perspective (Patton, 2002). School superintendents, in the process of selecting new principals, have a formidable task: assessing how much and what parts of the persona that a candidate reveals is true, predicting whether the known and assumed qualities of that candidate will ‘fit,’ and assuming that the criteria for selection will still be relevant for the length of the offered contract.

The superintendents surveyed in this study have, over time and through their interactions and experiences, constructed independent realities of what constitutes “professional characteristics” of principals, and it is those realities, more than any set of standards developed by any agency, that directly drive market demand for new principals.

Since 1995, PPPs accredited through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) [recently reformed as Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, or CAEP] have relied on the ELCC standards as a guiding force for preparation practices. Prior to 2002, the focus of accreditation was on evidence gleaned from program syllabi and other documents.

Subsequently, the ELCC standards were revised to focus primarily on evidence that PPP candidates were prepared to perform in the workplace, with documented evidence of what graduates know and are able to do (Shipman, Queen, & Peel, 2013). The ELCC standards were revised again in 2011, with a yet increasing focus on instructional leadership and changing perceptions of leadership.

The role of the principal as instructional leader was sometimes narrowly interpreted in the 90s as a didactic, all-knowing leadership

role (Smith & Piele, 2007) instead of a collaborative leadership role of facilitating instructional improvement (Kaser & Habert, 2009; Knight, 2011).

As Smith and Piele (2007) noted, “today’s conceptions of instructional leadership are much more complex than earlier versions” (p. 218). For example, concepts of transformational leadership (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Hallinger, 1992) and principal advocacy leadership or leadership for social justice (Anderson, 2009; Papa & English, 2011) have increasingly been used to further describe the principal’s role in instructional improvement. Fullan (2014) now even calls for principals to move beyond working with individual teachers and focus on groups of teachers to further leverage instructional involvement.

These evolving views of the characteristics and responsibilities of principals are reflected in both the ELCC standards and the Texas SBEC standards, which divide the principal’s responsibility into areas of school-community, instructional, and administrative leadership. PPPs have to respond to the changing nature of the principalship, by staying attuned to changes in accreditation standards, certification standards, and pragmatically, market demand.

Methods, Data Sources, Analysis

This exploratory study followed a two-phase format. During the first phase, the researchers developed a survey designed to capture Texas superintendents’ perspectives related to the efficacy of principal preparation, online learning and training, and related hiring practices. During the second phase, follow up telephone interviews were conducted with a stratified random sample of superintendents to explore in depth their perspectives and to cross-check the survey responses.

Instrumentation

The survey was piloted with a convenience sample of superintendents, who were asked to talk through their thinking while completing the survey so the researchers could listen for any areas of difficulty or confusion and ensure alignment between the researcher's intent and superintendents' understanding. The revised survey was delivered via e-mail through www.SurveyMonkey.com to all the superintendents of districts and charter schools in Texas, using information publicly available

in the AskTED (Texas Education Directory) data portal.

Survey sample

Of the 1112 emails sent, 67 bounced back as undeliverable, and 106 (N=106) were completed and returned, for a response rate of 10.1%. Though the response rate was low, the respondents did represent a diverse sample based on gender, school size, and years of experience as a superintendent, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Superintendent Respondent Characteristics

Gender		Experience		School Size	
77%	Male	38%	0-5	34%	A
23%	Female	28%	6-10	23%	AA
		23%	11-15	19%	AAA
		11%	16+	10%	AAAA
				6%	AAAAA
				4%	AAAAAA
				4%	Charter

The characteristics of the respondents closely align to the characteristics of Texas superintendents.

Interview sample

Utilizing simple stratified randomization of the samples (Lund Research) of the respondent demographic variables of School Size, Years in Role, and Gender, a second select sample of five superintendents was constructed. These five superintendents represented three males and two females; had one, two, five, ten, and 21

years of experience in the role; and represented AA, AAA, AAAA, and AAAAA schools in terms of size, generally reflecting the overall survey sample.

Data Analysis

Though the overall survey was part of a larger and separate study, the data pertinent to this study derive from a single question from the superintendent survey; namely, "Please list three (3) primary professional characteristics

you look for when screening/interviewing applicants for administrative positions.”

Respondents were presented three blanks in which to type responses, with no ranking or ordering of responses. Though more difficult to analyze (Shuman & Presser, 1996), the question was deliberately open-ended and intended to generate unfiltered responses and to leverage the “nonreactivity” described by Iyengar (1996). Utilizing a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), the purpose of which “is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (p. 238), the researchers collapsed the individual survey responses into generalized categories.

The 318 individual responses (106 respondents @3 responses each) were organized into a frame of 18 categories that developed from the actual words chosen by the superintendents, reflecting common language and terminology. Since the respondents were not asked to rank the characteristics, no consideration was given to the order the characteristics were listed within the survey itself.

The original intent was to compare the common response categories to the ELCC and SBEC standards, but anticipating equivocal results, a second step in the exploratory process was formulated. Noting that in addition to the opinions solicited in the original survey, a number of demographic data points about the responding superintendents themselves were also collected, the second phase of the exploration concerning the relationship between market demand and PPP curriculum/standards alignment was constructed.

The members of that sample were invited to participate in extended phone/Skype

interviews where they were asked to provide in-depth, unguided explanations of their own selection of the three primary characteristics sought when screening administrative candidates.

The interviews were unstructured, and consisted of only two questions: 1) What professional characteristics do you seek in principal candidates? and 2) How do you determine if the candidates have those characteristics? Of specific interest was the qualitative comparison between the superintendents’ own selections and those of the larger sample. Using open and axial coding (Merriam, 2009), the interview responses were spiraled into the survey results.

Results

Standards review

The first product of the investigation was a crosswalk aligning the ELCC standards with the SBEC competencies (Appendix A). The crosswalk was originally developed through the work of the researcher’s principal preparation program to facilitate program design and course alignment to the standards. Because each descriptor for each standard is so dense, direct correlation was difficult; hence, the two sets of standards are loosely coupled. Yet, the crosswalk provides a concise overview for those unfamiliar with either of the sets of standards.

Survey responses

The researchers then coded the 318 responses from the survey bank, collapsing them into the 18 categories represented in Figure 1 using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Due to both the language used by the superintendents and the density of the standards, the 18 categories were not directly relatable to the crosswalk. As anticipated, many of the categories were non-specific, reflecting

the words the superintendents provided in the open responses.

For example, the largest single category, representing 48 responses, was “knowledge;” and of those 48, 43 responses specifically used the single word “knowledge.” With no context in which to situate each superintendent’s conceptualization of knowledge, that category cannot be correlated to either set of standards, since each descriptor

within each standard represents some form of knowledge.

Additionally, due to the generalized terminology utilized by the superintendents, some categories may or may not have overlapping meanings (i.e. communication skills and collaborative skills or attitude and personality). The potential ambiguity necessitated phase 2 of this study, the follow up interviews.

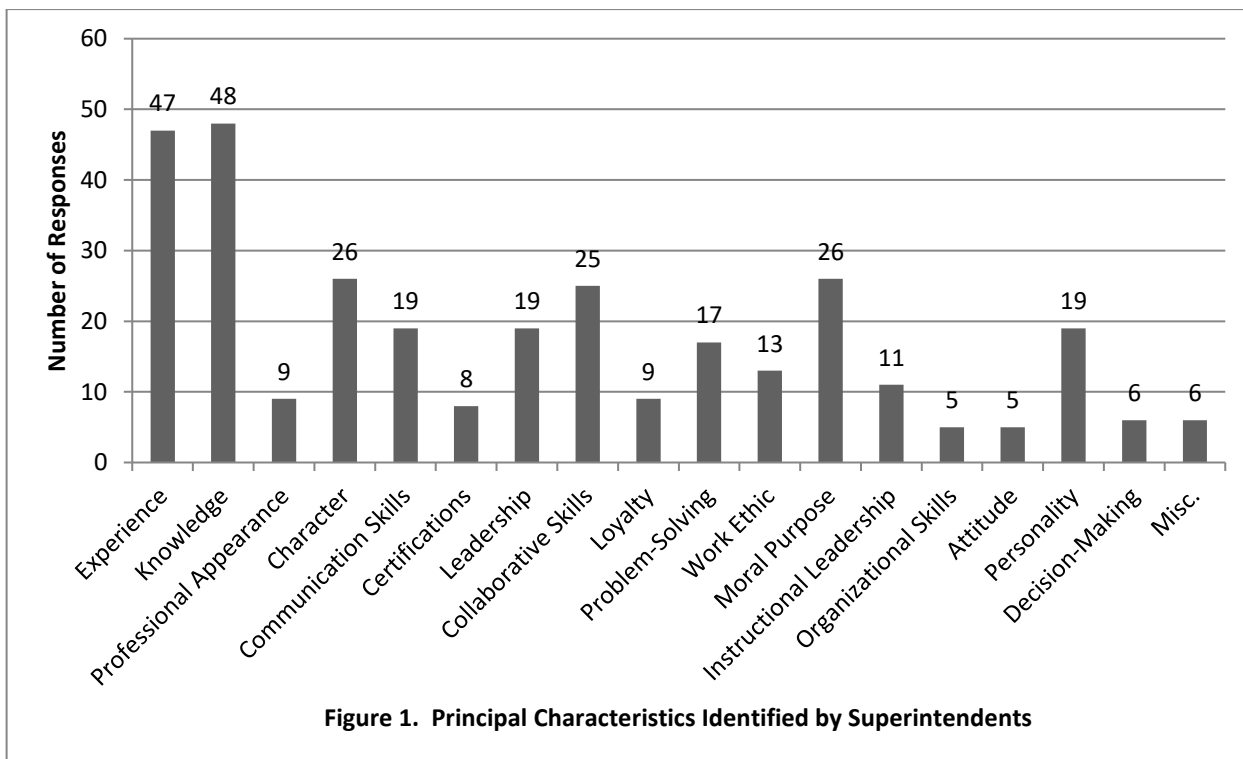


Figure 1. Principal characteristics identified by superintendents.

Interview responses

Five superintendents were asked to participate in a follow up interview, and all five accepted. Their interview responses were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Individual sentences, phrases, text fragments, and words were then coded into categories (Merriam, 2009).

Mirroring the survey responses, the most common desirable principal characteristic that emerged from the interviews was “knowledge.” In fact, all five superintendents used that word explicitly, with two following up with working definitions of knowledge. One superintendent related knowledge specifically

to public relations, instruction, and planning, noting that these were “non-negotiable” skills.

Another superintendent stretched the knowledge concept further, remarking that, “as fast as educational changes are taking place, it’s important for principals to have good fundamental knowledge about everything: curriculum, finance evaluations, special education, and to also read and stay on top of changes.”

Finally, a small-school superintendent emphasized the importance of the principal’s wide-ranging knowledge, commenting that “in a little school like mine, I must have principals who have a variety of skills and aren’t dependent on experts in different areas.”

If this broad concept of ‘knowledge’ is considered a tangible and/or measurable aspect of a principal candidate, the rest of the desired characteristics the superintendents mentioned might be considered more intangible, dispositional type characteristics, including character, drive, personality, trustworthiness, and ‘fit.’

To illustrate, one superintendent highlighted the need to know that potential principals are “well-grounded, non-adversarial, and can play well with others.” Another noted, “In a candidate, I try to decide if I would be able to trust them—and trust their love for children and always be ready to do whatever is in their best interest.” A final superintendent commented about the need for ‘fit’ among principals in the district, balancing the individual with the team.

This superintendent wants “healthy competition” between principals, while “still working together toward common district goals,” noting that “it’s like a family—brothers

might fight each other and call names, but nobody else better try that!”

When asked how they determined whether a principal candidate possessed the desired characteristics, all five of the superintendents offered two options: administrative work history (no mention of work history related to teaching) or more generalized impressions garnered from references and common acquaintances.

Comments included:

- “Honestly, when I need a principal, I usually just ask around among people I know.”
- “I ask other people who have interviewed them to share impressions—and not just specific answers to questions, but how they felt about them.”
- “For the one I’ve hired, I knew her and her work well.”
- “I look for potential so they can contribute to the district’s progress, but also for a record of achievement so that they can command respect and cooperation right away.”
- “I’m interested in what their current colleagues, supervisors, and teachers think. People don’t tend to change much in behavior or character when they change jobs.”

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate how market demand for principals, as determined by the preferred principal characteristics that hiring superintendents look for, aligns with the preparation standards established by accreditation and certification agencies and, by extension, to inform the work of the principal preparation program in terms of course and program design to prepare

candidates who are well-positioned to meet the expectations of all involved stakeholders.

The public school superintendents of Texas were surveyed to capture the top characteristics they look for when hiring a principal, and the primary desirable characteristic reported out was “knowledge” (followed closely by “experience”), representing 15% of the total responses.

While many of the respondents used the single word “knowledge,” follow up interviews seemed to indicate that superintendents were using the term to reference many of the specialized skills that comprise the bulk of the ELCC and Texas Principal Standards, including specific skills related to curriculum, instruction, special programs, community relations, planning and evaluation, and other administrative tasks.

Based on the interviews, further investigation would likely indicate that other of characteristics from Figure 1 could be subsumed in the knowledge category, particularly the categories of instructional leadership, organizational skills, and certifications.

If the overall concept of “knowledge,” and the specialized skills it represents, constitutes a first tier, a clear second tier of characteristics emerges when examining Figure 1.

The reported characteristics of character, moral purpose, and collaborative skills stand out, followed closely by personality, leadership, and communications skills. Taken together, these represent 42% of the total responses.

This second tier of characteristics represent soft skills or dispositional qualities inherent to the candidate, those some of these characteristics are reflected in the standards (e.g. both sets of standards specifically reference integrity, fairness, and ethics).

The follow up interviews reinforced the survey data but provided more insight into how superintendents expected the expressed characteristics to manifest in principal candidates: superintendents appear to rely heavily on personal impressions to determine whether or not candidates will “fit in” with the campus or district.

One important implication for preparation programs arises from noting what the superintendents did not say, rather than what they did say. In particular, none of them mentioned the importance of interview performance, work samples, portfolios, test scores, or other metrics candidates expect to be important when entering the job market.

Personal impressions, positive references, and an overall notion of “fit” are what land new principals jobs. Accordingly, preparation programs must emphasize the soft skills, focus on interpersonal skills, and reinforce the importance of networking.

Overall, the data indicate that, whether intentional or not, superintendents hew somewhat closely to both the content and intent of the standards, through emphasis on both hard and soft skills. Most principal preparation programs likely focus on both types of skills but lean to the knowledge-based skills. Superintendents likely lean to the soft skills, so some disparity exists, but it is a bridgeable divide.

Author Biographies

Scott Bailey currently teaches aspiring principals at Stephen F. Austin State University and provides assistance to local campuses on school improvement efforts. He has also served as a public school principal at the middle and high school levels. E-mail: baileybryan@sfasu.edu

Barbara Qualls is the principal preparation program coordinator at Stephen F. Austin State University. Before coming to the university, she has served as superintendent at both large and small schools and also as principal at various campuses in Texas. E-mail: quallsba@sfasu.edu

References

- Day, C., & Leithwood, K. (2007). Building and sustaining successful principalship: Key themes. In *Successful principal leadership in times of change* (pp. 171-188). Springer Netherlands.
- Educational Leadership Constituent Council (2011). *Educational leadership program standards, 2011 ELCC Building-Level*. National Policy Board for Educational Administration. Retrieved from <http://www.ncate.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=zRZI73R0nOQ%3D&tabid=676>
- Iyengar, S. (1996). Framing responsibility for political issues. *Annals of the American academy of political and social science*, 546(1), 59-70.
- Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hallinger, P. (1992). The evolving role of American principals: From managerial to instructional to transformational leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 30(3).
- Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2009). *Leadership mindsets: Innovation and learning in the transformation of schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Knight, J. (2011). *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- Lund Research Ltd., *Stratified random sampling*. Retrieved from <http://dissertation.laerd.com/stratified-random-sampling.php>
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Normore, A. (2004). The new work of educational leaders: Changing leadership practice in an era of school reform. *Journal of educational administration*, 42. 511-514.
- Papa, R. & English, F. W. (2011). *Turnaround principals for underperforming schools*. New York: NY. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schuman, H & Presser, S. (1996). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys: Experiments on question form, wording, and context*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Smith, S. C. & Piele, P. K. (2006). *School leadership: Handbook for excellence in student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Shipman, N., Queen, J. A., & Peel, H. (2013). *Transforming school leadership with ISLLC and ELCC*. NY: Routledge.
- Thomas, D.R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.
- Waters, T. & Cameron, M.A. (2007). *The balanced leadership framework: Connecting vision with action*. Denver, CO: McREL.
- Young, M. (2015). Effective leadership preparation: We know what it looks like and what it can do. *Journal of research on leadership education*, 10(1), 3-10.

Appendix A
Standards Crosswalk

ELCC Standard	Texas/SBEC Competency
Standard 1: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community.	Competency 001: The principal knows how to shape campus culture by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
Standard 4: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders with the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.	Competency 002: The principal knows how to communicate and collaborate with all members of the school community, respond to diverse interests and needs, and mobilize resources to promote school success.
Standard 5: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.	Competency 003: The principal knows how to act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical and legal manner.
Standard 2: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing and effective instructional program, applying best practices to student learning.	Competency 004: The principal knows how to facilitate the design and implementation of curricula and strategic plans that enhance teaching and learning; ensure alignment of curriculum, instruction, resources and assessments to measure student performance.
	Competency 005: The principal knows how to advocate, nurture, and sustain an instructional program and a campus culture that are conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
NA	Competency 006: The principal knows how to implement a staff evaluation and development system to improve the performance of all staff members, select and implement appropriate models for supervision and staff development, and apply legal requirements for personnel management.
NA	Competency 007: The principal knows how to apply organizational, decision-making, and problem solving skills to ensure an effective learning environment.
Standard 3: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.	Competency 008: The principal knows how to apply effective leadership and management in relation to campus budgeting, personnel, resource utilization, financial management, and technology use.
	Competency 009: The principal knows how to apply principles of leadership and management to the campus physical plant and support systems to ensure a safe and effective learning environment.
Standard 6: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.	NA
Standard 7: The internship provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice and develop the skills identified in Standards 1-6 through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided cooperatively by the institution and school district personnel for graduate credit.	Competencies 001-009