

A Renewed Call to Action: Update Principal Selection Methods

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Abstract

Many states have committed to adoption of Common Core State Standards, necessitating extensive preparation for both teachers and students. School districts and particularly school principals have been responsible for ensuring transition and readiness. This demand illustrates the complexity of the principalship and its relationship to student achievement. Principal selection is of paramount importance. This mixed methods study sought to determine which of 21 leadership responsibilities were important to top-level school district administrators when hiring principals and how top-level school administrators assessed these responsibilities during principal selection. Results of this study indicated all 21 leadership responsibilities are important for top-level school administrators to consider when hiring school principals. However, most of the participants indicated they do not have a methodical method to evaluate the 21 leadership responsibilities.

Key Words

principal selection, school principal, human resources, student achievement

The adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by 43 States has obligated school districts to commit significant financial and personnel resources to embrace a paradigm shift in education, moving from recall and rote-memorization of information or facts to rigorous and relevant cross-curricular learning. As a result, school principals have significant responsibility for ensuring that both teachers and students at their respective school sites are prepared for the next generation of teaching and learning centered on core competencies that have primacy in learning such as Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening across core subject areas (CCSS, 2014).

The leadership demonstrated by principals during implementation of CCSS is essential to the success of staff and students at their schools. School principals have been identified throughout decades of literature as one of the key school personnel affecting student achievement (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Gullatt & Lofton, 1986; Hallinger & Heck 1996; Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mills, McDowelle, & Rouse, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). The mechanisms used by school districts to select principals may never have been more important than today, as school principals must navigate the shifting education tides while simultaneously focusing on student achievement within their schools.

The purpose of this research study was to examine two questions. First, how important are each of the 21 leadership responsibilities developed by Waters et al. (2004) to top-level school district administrators when assessing principal candidates? Second, how are those attributes actually assessed during principal selection processes? This study is a duplication of the study conducted by Rammer (2007) in

the state of Wisconsin; however, it was conducted nationally in the United States.

This study is significant because it continues the much-needed research of principal selection by investigated how principals are selected throughout the United States.

Literature Review

Role of principal in student achievement

Early interest in the relationship between school leadership and student achievement occurred during the 1970's. During the 1980's, Gardner's (1983) *A Nation at Risk* was published and educational reform came to the front of the national agenda as school systems in the United States were taken to task for numerous issues (e.g., content, expectations, time, and teaching) related to student achievement.

The use of student achievement data as a means of evaluating the key players in education (e.g., teachers and administrators) for accountability purposes was accelerated. As stated by Heck (1992), "The public's demand for educational accountability have advanced the use of achievement data to evaluate instructional efforts, because of concerns about poor educational outcomes in many schools and the perceptions that America is declining as an economic power" (p. 21). These concerns have led to numerous studies examining the principal's effect on student achievement (e.g., Gullatt & Lofton, 1986; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck 1996; Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mills, McDowelle, & Rouse, 2011; Waters et al., 2004).

Conducting research to find a relationship between the school principal and student achievement has proven to be complex,

and often only indirect evidence of a relationship has been found (Heck, 1992). Gullat and Lofton (1986) analyzed principals' effect on student achievement by examining principals' school governance, collaboration, and allocation of personnel resources. Findings from their study indicated that principals should be effective in promoting student achievement if they

“a) possess a substantial knowledge base in curriculum, instruction, and evaluation; b) provide vision and direction for the school; c) promote positive teaching and learning environments; d) establish patterns of effective communication and motivation; and (e) maintain high expectations for self, staff, and students.” (p. 22)

Furthermore, as teachers are the facilitators of instruction, principals should be well versed in curriculum and instruction and current research related to instruction in order to support teachers in this endeavor (Gullat & Lofton, 1986).

Hallinger and Heck reviewed school leadership and student achievement literature from 1980 to 1995 and found that school leadership targeting internal processes had a direct impact on student achievement. Internal processes were described as “academic expectations, school mission, student opportunity to learn, instructional organization, and academic learning time” (1996, p. 38).

Waters et al. (2004) conducted a meta-analysis by reviewing “more than 5,000 studies—published since the 1970’s—purported to have examined the effect of leadership”; only 70 met their stringent scientific design criteria (p. 4-5). Findings included a quantification of general leadership effects on student achievement, a statistically significant relationship between 21 of the leadership responsibilities identified and student achievement, and a “differential impact” (i.e., positive and negative) of leadership on student achievement. The 21 leadership responsibilities developed by Waters et al. (2004), along with summarized definitions, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

The 21 Responsibilities of Effective Leaders

<i>Culture</i> (develop school culture, shared beliefs, and norms)	<i>Visibility</i> (maintains presence in classrooms)	<i>Change agent</i> (challenge stagnant school practices)
<i>Order</i> (establish predictability through procedures)	<i>Contingent rewards</i> (promote high expectations and praise exemplary staff)	<i>Optimizer</i> (focus staff on positive aspects of school and potential future success)
<i>Discipline</i> (safeguard staff from distractions that may disrupt teaching and learning)	<i>Communication</i> (develop and foster communication channels among staff)	<i>Ideals/beliefs</i> (guided by well-developed beliefs regarding education)
<i>Resources</i> (ensuring teachers have necessary training, support, and materials)	<i>Outreach</i> (advocate for school stakeholders to ensure compliance with regulations)	<i>Monitors/evaluates</i> (establish evaluate practices and feedback systems to monitor learning outcomes)
<i>Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment</i> (support teachers with design and implementation)	<i>Input</i> (promote staff input in decision-making through procedures)	<i>Flexibility</i> (Honor opinions from staff and adapt leadership style when necessary)
<i>Focus</i> (establish and promote measureable school goals)	<i>Affirmation</i> (celebrate staff and school successes and acknowledge deficiencies)	<i>Situational awareness</i> (attentive to daily school operations and proactively address potential problems)
<i>Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, assessment</i> (maintain awareness of research on effective teaching practices)	<i>Relationship</i> (develop and maintain personal relationships with staff)	<i>Intellectual stimulation</i> (use current educational research practices in school discussions)

Note: Adapted from *School Leadership that Works* by R. J. Marzano, T. Waters, and B. McNulty, 2005, p. 71

The review of literature revealed only one researcher who had attempted to use Waters et al.'s (2004) 21 leadership responsibilities to conduct principal selection research from the perspective of the superintendent. Rammer (2007) examined

whether Wisconsin superintendents believed Waters et al.'s (2004) 21 leadership responsibilities were important and how the leadership responsibilities were assessed during principal selection. According to Rammer (2007), most of the participant (92%, n=136)

superintendents believed the 21 leadership responsibilities were an important consideration when hiring principals.

However, *only 1.2%* (n=19) of participant superintendents had a systematic or methodical means of assessing *only 1 of the 21* leadership responsibilities in principal candidates (Rammer, 2007). This result may seem mystifying on the surface; however, principal selection methods have seldom been the subject of research or scrutinized by researchers (Blackmore, Thomspson, & Barty, 2006), therefore leaving the methods used to select principals reliant on intuition.

Principal selection processes

The processes used to select school principals are seldom described within the principal selection literature (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). In their pioneering principal selection research, Baltzell and Dentler (1983) differentiated four processes that makeup the procedures used to select school principals: (a) a vacancy announcement, (b) forming a candidate pool, (c) screening, and (d) the employment decision.

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) included the interview process within the screening step. However, Levine and Flory (1975) described screening as the ranking of candidates based on application materials submitted following the vacancy announcement. Palmer (2014) proposed a six stage model for principal selection in which *screening*, as was described by Levine and Flory (1975), is an initial stage with evaluation stages taking place later in the selection process.

Palmer's (2014) six stages were (a) vacancy announcement, (b) screening, (c) pool of candidates established, (d) evaluation, (e) re-evaluation, and (f) decision. Steps (d) and (e) include processes such as interviews, performance tasks, written tests, and

presentations. Although the stages are helpful to understanding principal selection, the stages may be of less importance than what actually occurs within them, especially the evaluation stages leading to a hiring decision.

The screening stage is where candidates are typically first assessed against the selection criteria; this stage is the gateway to later evaluation stages (Palmer, 2014). The evaluation stages, which also purport to assess candidates against the selection criteria include interviews, which are one of the most commonly used procedures within principal selection (Anderson, 1991; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kwan, 2012; Palmer, 2014; Rammer, 2007; Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Wendel & Breed, 1988).

Despite their primacy in selection processes, interviews have been seen as problematic (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Hogan & Zenke, 1986; Palmer, 2014; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Wendel & Breed, 1988). Principal selectors' reliance on interviews casts principal selection as a highly subjective process in which selectors rely on instinct or intuition (Gronn & Lacey 2006; Morgan, Hall, & McKay, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Rammer, 2007; Wendell & Breed, 1988).

Rammer (2007) suggested superintendents may intuitively know what they are looking for in a principal candidate and use the interview to assess those traits. Other researchers have suggested the principal selectors' ambiguous rationale for selection to be spurious. Baltzell and Dentler (1983) questioned top-level district leadership on the operationalization of educational leadership during their study and described the response they were given as a "circular definition cycle" which heavily relied upon "fit" (p. 6). Some researchers have also suggested selectors may not actually be looking for specific criteria

within principal selection procedures but instead may be looking for “fit” (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore, Thomson, & Barty, 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006).

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) defined “fit” as “interpersonal perceptions of a candidate’s physical presence, projection of a certain self-confidence and assertiveness, and embodiment of community values and methods of operation” (p. 7). Blackmore et al. (2004) argued, “The selection process, the primary ‘gate-keeping’ mechanism to the principalship, a position seen as the lynchpin of educational reform and school success, is regarded widely as a biased and unpredictable event” (p. 300).

In brief, principal selection methods are important and further research is needed to support an improvement of the process.

Objective methods

Within principal selection literature, few procedures having psychometric validity, such as assessments and performance tasks, are mentioned. Assessments appeared to have widespread use decades ago as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) established assessment centers to evaluate principals for a variety of traits.

While the NASSP assessment centers have been discontinued, assessments appear to be used on a limited basis within school districts (Palmer, 2014); however, the validity of those assessments are unknown. A performance task designed by Wildy, Pepper, and Guanzhong (2011) shows promise, although its actual use within principal selection is unknown. In research by Palmer (2014), school principals (n=221) indicated performance tasks and assessments were seldom used.

School district’s reliance on selectors’ intuition may result in the bias and unpredictability described by Blackmore et al. (2004) and illustrates the need for further research of selection criteria (i.e., candidate characteristics or attributes) and how those criteria are actually assessed through procedures within principal selection in order to develop new objective selection methods.

Method

A mixed methods research design was used to examine top-level school district administrators’ perceptions of Walters et al.’s (2004) 21 leadership responsibilities within principal selection. According to Creswell (2009), mixed methods strengthen a study by using two complimentary methods instead of a single method to obtain data.

The research questions this study sought to answer were how important are each of the 21 leadership responsibilities developed by Waters et al. (2004) to top-level school district administrators when assessing principal candidates, and how are those attributes actually assessed during principal selection processes?

Sampling and participants

A random purposive sampling method was used to select study participants. Superintendent emails were retrieved from States’ education school directories as well as county and school websites. A total of 12,229 emails were retrieved representing all 50 states within the United States. Participant emails were incorporated into an excel spreadsheet and assigned a unique numerical value. A random number generator was then used to select 4,296 participants. Selected superintendent email addresses were then transferred into an excel database to generate a

population list. In order to also obtain surveys from human resource managers, superintendents were asked to forward the survey to their human resource manager if they were unable to complete the survey. Participants were asked in one of the demographic questions on the survey to

provide their current position, thereby enabling differentiation of responses from superintendents and human resource managers. The survey was sent to 4,296 participants with 83 surveys being returned for a 1.9% response rate. Participant demographics are located in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics by Percentage of the Sample (n=83)

Variables	Percentages	Variables	Percentages
Position		Age range	
Superintendent	78.3	56 years and older	47.0
H.R. Asst. Supt.	9.6	46-55 years	38.6
Other	12.0	36-45 years	12.0
Gender		< 35 years	2.4
Male	66.3	Years as top-level administrator	
Female	33.7	1-5	22.9
Race-ethnicity		6-10	22.9
Caucasian	90.4	11-15	27.7
African-American	7.2	16-20	12.0
Hispanic	2.4	21 or more	14.5
Asian	0.0		
Highest degree			
Doctorate	53.0		
Masters	45.9		
Bachelors	1.2		

Instrument

According to Kwan and Walker (2009), principal selection research lacks a validated instrument. However, Rammer (2007) developed an instrument using the 21 leadership responsibilities and related definitions identified in the research by Waters et al., (2004). Prior to commencing the full study, Rammer (2007) piloted his instrument and obtained a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of .89, which was well above the acceptable .70.

Permission to use the instrument was obtained from Rammer prior to commencement of this study. Although Rammer (2007) developed the instrument for superintendents, this study also sought the responses of human resource managers who should be able to describe the practices used to select principals within their respective districts.

The instrument contains eight demographic questions, 21 multiple choice 4-

point Likert-scale (e.g., strongly agree-strongly disagree) questions (1 for each of the 21 responsibilities) and 21 narrative response questions designed to solicit how participants assess candidates on each of the 21 leadership responsibilities.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Constant comparative analysis methods developed by Glaser (1965) were used for the qualitative data. Two coders conducted the qualitative analysis, and an inter-coder reliability of at least .80 was established by comparing results at multiple intervals during data analysis of the narrative responses. Analyzing data with multiple coders allows the reliability of the data to be tested (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Furthermore, using multiple coders is critical in establishing validity (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

Participant responses to open-ended narrative questions were analyzed to determine if the procedure used to assess the leadership responsibility was passive or intentional. A procedure was categorized as passive if it was assessed through an interview, submitted materials (e.g., resume, cover letter, etc.), references, or some other assessment that was not intentional such as perception.

A blank response was considered as not having an assessment for that particular leadership responsibility. Responses were categorized and quantified as intentional assessments if the participant described a procedure that was not an interview, submitted materials, or from references (i.e., a specific method for evaluation had been developed).

Results

Importance of the 21 responsibilities

Responses to Likert-scale survey items asking participants how important they consider each of the 21 leadership responsibilities to be when selecting principals yielded some results with unanimity or near unanimity. The results of participant agreement of importance ranged from 100% (*communication, flexibility, focus, and visibility*) to 91.6% (*involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment*). Nearly all participants' responses (1698/1743, 97.4%) considered all of the 21 leadership responsibilities to at least be important when selecting principals.

The leadership responsibility with the highest response rate for strongly agree was *communication* (91.6%). Participants considered *flexibility, focus, and visibility* along with *communication* to be important, as no participants disagreed or strongly disagreed regarding their importance. Only 2.6% (45/1743) of the total responses indicated participants disagreed or strongly disagreed regarding the 21 leadership responsibilities. *Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment* had the most disagreement among the 21 leadership responsibilities, as 7 participant responses indicated they disagreed regarding the importance of this responsibility when selecting principals. *Affirmation and change agent* were the only leadership responsibilities among the 21 where participants indicated they strongly disagreed (1 for each leadership responsibility) that those leadership responsibilities were important to consider when selecting principals. Results for the extent to which participants considered the importance of the 21 responsibilities are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Responses by All Participants to Likert-scale Questions Regarding the 21 Responsibilities

Responsibility	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Affirmation	45	54.2	36	43.4	1	1.2	1	1.2	83
Change agent	46	55.4	35	42.2	1	1.2	1	1.2	83
Contingent rewards	14	16.9	65	78.3	4	4.8	0	0	83
Communication	76	91.6	7	8.4	0	0	0	0	83
Culture	61	73.5	21	25.3	1	1.2	0	0	83
Discipline	35	42.2	45	54.2	3	3.6	0	0	83
Flexibility	44	53.0	39	47.0	0	0	0	0	83
Focus	53	63.9	30	36.1	0	0	0	0	83
Ideals/beliefs	42	50.6	38	45.8	3	3.6	0	0	83
Input	45	54.2	36	43.4	2	2.4	0	0	83
Intellectual stimulation	35	42.2	44	53.0	4	4.8	0	0	83
Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	39	47.0	37	44.6	7	8.4	0	0	83
Knowledge in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	46	55.4	36	43.4	1	1.2	0	0	83
Monitoring/evaluation	56	67.5	26	31.3	1	1.2	0	0	83
Optimizer	42	50.6	38	45.8	3	3.6	0	0	83
Order	31	37.3	50	60.2	2	2.4	0	0	83
Outreach	36	43.4	44	53.0	3	3.6	0	0	83
Relationship	46	55.4	35	42.2	2	2.4	0	0	83
Resources	36	43.4	44	53.0	3	3.6	0	0	83
Situational awareness	52	62.7	29	34.9	2	2.4	0	0	83
Visibility	58	69.9	25	30.1	0	0	0	0	83

Assessing for the 21 responsibilities

Narrative responses were analyzed to determine how top-level school district administrators assess for each of the 21 leadership

responsibilities. Just over half of all participant responses (880/1743, 50.5%) indicated participants passively assess for the

21 leadership responsibilities. Participants did not describe or note an assessment in 39.5% (689/1743) of the total responses. Intentional

assessments were described within 10.0% (174/1743) of all responses. Results for narrative response are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Responses by All Participants to Narrative Questions Regarding the 21 Responsibilities

Responsibility	Passive Assessment(s)		No Assessment		Intentional Assessment(s)		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Affirmation	51	61.4	17	20.5	15	18.1	83
Change agent	50	60.2	26	31.3	7	8.4	83
Contingent rewards	41	49.4	31	37.3	11	13.3	83
Communication	48	57.8	26	31.3	9	10.8	83
Culture	47	56.5	26	31.3	10	12.0	83
Discipline	41	49.4	33	39.8	9	10.8	83
Flexibility	45	54.2	28	33.7	10	12.0	83
Focus	47	56.6	30	36.1	6	7.2	83
Ideals/beliefs	42	50.6	35	42.2	6	7.2	83
Input	40	48.2	32	38.6	11	13.3	83
Intellectual stimulation	42	50.6	34	41.0	7	8.4	83
Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	36	43.4	40	48.2	7	8.4	83
Knowledge in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	41	49.4	35	42.2	7	8.4	83
Monitoring/evaluation	39	47.0	36	43.4	8	9.6	83
Optimizer	39	47.0	39	47.0	5	6.0	83
Order	38	45.8	39	47.0	6	7.2	83
Outreach	43	51.8	34	41.0	6	7.2	83
Relationship	39	47.0	36	43.4	8	9.6	83
Resources	35	42.2	39	47.0	9	10.8	83
Situational awareness	41	49.4	36	43.4	6	7.2	83
Visibility	35	42.2	37	44.6	11	13.3	83
Total	880	50.5	689	39.5	174	9.7	

Passive assessments (50.5%) included participants' use of terms such as question(s) (342 responses), interview(s) (297 responses), reference(s) (256 responses), resume(s) (28 responses), and perception(s) (16 responses). *Affirmation* (61.4%), *change agent* (60.2%), *communication* (57.8%), *culture* (56.5%) had the highest percentages of passive assessments among the 21 leadership responsibilities. A typical narrative response indicating a passive assessment included specific questions participants asked candidates or procedures used to assess for the leadership responsibility. For example, Participant 13 assessed *affirmation* "through questioning during the interview process, through reference checks, and through the use of open-ended questions that are part of the application process. Similarly, Participant 55 described using an "interview, references, knowledge of candidate" as an assessment.

Participants indicated they did not have an assessment for the 21 leadership responsibilities in 39.5% (689/1743) of responses. If no response was given, it was interpreted as not having an assessment. Also, in some cases participants provided a response which made a statement regarding the leadership responsibility but did not actually describe an assessment. Participant 70 exemplified this type of response regarding the assessment of *communication* by stating "communication is the key to success of an administrator. He/she must be able to talk with and to all involved." While this declaration of the importance of communication may provide an interesting commentary, it failed to describe an assessment. *Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment* was the most reported leadership responsibility with no assessment by participants (40/83, 48.2%). The *affirmation* leadership responsibility had the least amount of no assessments (17/83, 20.5) by participants.

Intentional assessments were described within 10.0% (174/1743) of the total responses for the 21 leadership responsibilities. Site visits (41 responses), assessments (60 responses), and writing (26 responses) mostly in the form of specific writing prompts were among the most common intentional assessments described by participants. Participants indicated *affirmation* was the most intentionally assessed trait of the 21 leadership responsibilities (15/83, 18.1%). *Optimizer* was noted by participants as the least intentionally assessed trait (5/83, 6.0%). Procedures which contained both passive and intentional assessments within a single answer were noted by participants at times, as they appeared to list the same response throughout all 21 of their narrative responses for each leadership responsibility (i.e., copy/paste throughout the survey). While it may be implausible a particular participant assessed for all 21 leadership responsibilities using a writing prompt for each responsibility, it was assumed the participant in fact assessed in this manner. For example, Participant 20 indicated they assess for each of the 21 leadership responsibilities using "interview questions, resume, writing prompt, references." A response such as this was coded as an intentional assessment for this particular leadership responsibility because a writing prompt was considered intentional even though it was used in conjunction with passive assessments.

Discussion

Results of this mixed method study are encouraging when compared to previous results from the research conducted by Rammer in 2007. Participants of this study were nearly unanimous (97.4%) in agreeing that the 21 leadership responsibilities were important considerations in hiring decisions, compared to Rammer's (2007) study where 92.0% of

participants considered the 21 leadership responsibilities important. Similarly, only 2.6% of participants of this study disagreed that some of the 21 leadership responsibilities were important to consider when selecting principals compared to 7.8% of participants from Rammer's (2007) study. Furthermore, the lack of intentional assessments by top-level school district administrators was apparent in both Rammer's (2007) and this study.

Communication as a leadership responsibility

Communication has long been considered an important responsibility for principals to possess throughout principal selection literature. Most participants of this study strongly agreed *communication* was important to consider when selecting a school principal and no participants disagreed or strongly disagreed regarding its importance as a leadership responsibility. In fact, *communication* had the highest percentage of strongly agree responses from participants (91.6%).

Considering the importance of communication in selecting school principals, it was surprising participants did not indicate the highest intentional or passive assessments for this trait. Also surprising was that many participants did not indicate any assessment for *communication* (26/83, 31.3%) and only nine participants (10.8%) had an intentional assessment for it. As the interview is widely used within principal selection (Anderson, 1991; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kwan, 2012; Palmer, 2014; Rammer, 2007; Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Wendel & Breed, 1988) and could be considered at least a passive assessment for communication, this result was curious. During CCSS implementation and beyond, a principal's ability to communicate will be

paramount to the ultimate success or failure of teachers and students as they teach and learn respectively. Finding ways to assess communication within principal selection warrants further study.

Subjective assessments

Participants of this study reported practices similar to those found in other studies within principal selection, with the most subjective methods being common. Interviews (i.e., passive assessments) are the primary means by which principals are selected (Anderson, 1991; Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Kwan, 2012; Palmer, 2014; Rammer, 2007; Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990; Walker & Kwan, 2012; Wendel & Breed, 1988). When combining results (passive and intentional) for assessments of the 21 leadership responsibilities, only 60.5% of participants total responses (1054/1743) indicated they assessed for the 21 leadership responsibilities, even though 97.4% (1698/1743) of participants agreed or strongly agreed the 21 leadership responsibilities were important to consider when selecting school principals. With nearly 40% (689/1743) of participant responses indicating no assessment for the 21 leadership responsibilities, one has to wonder how top-level school district administrators are assessing for traits they believe are important. Either top-level school district administrators are assessing for traits other than the 21 leadership responsibilities, such as "fit," or the administrators have limited methodical or intentional means of assessment, as has been found by other researchers (e.g., Greene, 1954, Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Blackmore et al., 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer, 2014, Rammer, 2007). If top-level school district administrators have no means, or only passive means of assessing for attributes they believe are important to consider when selecting school principals, this finding leads to the question: How are school principal candidates assessed during selection?

Intuition

According to the literature, use of intuition is one method top-level school district administrators use to select principals (Gronn & Lacey 2006; Morgan, Hall, & McKay, 1983; Parkay & Armstrong, 1987; Wendell & Breed, 1988). In this study, perception was specifically mentioned within 16 responses as a means of assessing principal candidates during selection. Rammer (2007) explained that superintendents can observe the traits they are looking for during selection and hire the candidate which possesses the desired traits. Objective methods are needed to help top-level school district administrators make important selection decisions, especially when considering the principals effect on student achievement.

Assessing for the 21 leadership responsibilities

Results of this study are promising in one aspect, as top-level school district administrators appear to have near-universally considered the 21 leadership responsibilities to be important for principal candidates to possess. However, results of this study confirm Rammer's (2007) findings indicating top-level school district administrators may not be objectively assessing for principal traits related to student achievement. The lack of objectivity in selection assessments should be cause for concern among education stakeholders and the general public at large. A paradigm shift is needed for the way school principals are selected. Top-level school district administrators should develop specific intentional assessments in order to determine whether or not principal candidates actually possess the traits desired for the position. As the traits that top-level school district administrators *should* be looking for have already been established, objectively assessing for some or all of the 21 leadership responsibilities should be a high priority for

top-level school district administrators who hope to raise or sustain student achievement within their schools.

Several researchers have discussed and developed objective means for assessing principal candidates. Rammer (2007) described the development of new methods as "critical but not difficult" (p. 75). He also discussed the development of "specifically designed simulations or measurements designed to evaluate written materials to assess the characteristics of the candidates" (p. 75). One such method was developed over 30 years ago by Broward County Public Schools (BCPS).

Baltzell and Dentler (1983) described a blind screening process used by BCPS where a screening committee assessed candidates' submitted materials. All identification information (e.g., names, addresses, phone number) was removed from the submitted materials prior to the review. In particular, the candidate's references were asked to complete an empirically weighted characteristics appraisal form for rating the candidate without knowing the weights of the traits listed. The empirical weights of the traits on the form were a closely guarded secret within the district. Based on scoring from the blind review of submitted materials and the reference protocol, the highest scoring candidates were then selected to proceed to the interview stage. In more recent selection literature, objective assessment processes have not been noted, with the exception of Wildy et al.'s (2011) performance task used in Australia.

Wildy et al. (2011) developed a performance task which was found to have acceptable validity and reliability for evaluating principal candidates. The performance task was developed with fairness in mind and

included a rubric, rater training in which the raters had to undergo the same performance task as principal candidates, bias training, and participation in a data validation session following the performance tasks to ensure objectivity.

Candidates undergoing the performance task had to “demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skill in relation to the leadership framework in general and the role of principal in particular” by completing three separate performance tasks (p. 281). Tasks included document review and presentations which addressed “real-world” school issues such as “dealing with a poor performing department head, handling a critical incident, and implementing school-wide curriculum change” (p. 280).

Candidates were required to fill a variety of roles including communication with large groups, subordinates, and superiors. The raters worked in groups for each task and were prohibited from communicating with each other or working with the same rater in subsequent tasks within an evaluation day to prevent data contamination. The performance task developed by Wildy et al. (2011) was found to

have construct validity and robust reliability as indicated by Rasch analysis.

Conclusion

Top-level school district administrators, school human resources professionals, school administrator professional organizations, and researchers should give the development of new principal selection methods serious and immediate attention. Wildy et al.’s (2011) performance task and the blind screening review implemented 30 years ago at BCPS are only two examples of objective measures that could move principal selection from using mostly subjective processes to objective means of evaluating principal candidates.

Incorporating the 21 leadership responsibilities posited by Waters et al. (2004) into objective assessments would provide top-level school district administrators an empirically tested and reliable method for selecting school principals, and relatedly could help to raise or sustain student achievement. Given the high stakes environment of Common Core State Standards implementation and schools’ past academic performance since the inception of *The No Child Left Behind* legislation, the impetus for change may never be more present than it is now.

Author Biography

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