PLANNING TO GROW YOUR OWN PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS: CULTIVATING EXCELLENCE IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

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ABSTRACT

School districts concerned with finding high quality principals for their schools should consider developing their own principals through "grow your own" programs. School district "grow your own" programs need system-wide leadership to be successful (Joseph, 2009; Morrison, 2005). If districts systemically incorporate such programs into their strategic plan as a form of succession planning, they have the potential to recruit and retain a talented workforce. The goals and outcomes of the program should be directly linked to the school district's strategic plan to ensure that it is a funding priority for the school system.

INTRODUCTION

There are fewer and fewer qualified candidates available to assume the role of principal in American schools (Educational Research Services, 2000). School systems around the nation are attempting to deal with this shortage of leadership at a time when standards and accountability demands are high, stress levels due to the job are high, pressures on local budgets are high, and salaries for the job are low. The shortage of people desiring to assume the principalship, especially at the secondary level, is detrimental to the future of American public school education because the principal has consistently been cited as a key factor to a school's success (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Murphy, 2002; Waters et al., 2003).

Recruiting principal candidates is only one part of the challenge districts face in securing high caliber principals. Over the past 20 years, initial licensure programs for aspiring principals have been under scrutiny. In 1987, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEEA) published *Leaders for America's Schools,* which was critical of schools of education and their educational leadership preparation programs as they related to recruitment practices, instructional leadership preparation, professional development, licensure standards, and use of real-world problems and experiences. The National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA) published *Improving the Preparation of School Administration: An Agenda for Reform*, and in 1990, it published *Alternative Certification for School Leaders*. These two reports emphasized revising core curricula to focus on instructional practice and ethics, raising standards for licensure and certification, and stressing clinical experience. The Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation published *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto* in 2003. This report argued that school leadership programs should be abolished and replaced with alternative programs that were created and implemented by schools, districts, and states instead of universities. Most recently, Levine (2005) identified weak criteria for admissions, irrelevant courses, weak academic rigor, unskilled teachers, and incoherent curricula as problem areas in traditional training programs. If graduate schools of education are not adequately preparing candidates to assume principalships, and if the shortage in the pipeline to the principalship continues, districts will face dire shortages in applicants for this critical position. In response, districts need to devise creative ways to maintain the quantity and quality of principal candidates for their schools.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

With a shortage of candidates to assume the principalship, and with traditional preparation programs being criticized for not adequately preparing future administrative candidates, many school districts are attempting to develop their own principals through district-run programs. "Grow Your Own" principal preparation programs are becoming more common in large school districts, but the literature on grow your own principal preparation programs is scarce (Joseph, 2009; Miracle, 2006; Morrison, 2005). According to Glasman, Cibulka, & Ashby (2002), there are growing numbers of innovative leadership preparation programs around the country, yet there is little or no systematic evaluation of them. As school districts grapple with shrinking budgets, investigations that explore the economic factors associated with grow

your own programs and how school districts manage to maintain high quality programs in changing budgetary times are needed. The purpose of this study was to evaluate a secondary principal development program in a large school district in a mid-Atlantic state. The original study used Stufflebeam's (2000) Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) evaluation model as a conceptual framework. This article will focus on the input evaluation from the original study. The input evaluation was heavily focused on resource allocation, and was intended to answer questions such as: How is the secondary principal training program funded? Were there barriers to implementing effective research-based practices due to funding limitations?

CONTEXT OF STUDY

The study was conducted in a school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. District Y was the largest school district within its state during the study. District Y had both suburban and urban characteristics, and it was one of the most diverse school districts in the state. The average SAT score for the district during the time of the study was 1624 when averaging the scores on the critical reading, mathematics, and writing subtests. The total possible score on the SAT is 2400. The SAT was the most widely accepted college admissions test in the region in which this study was conducted. There were 200 schools within the school district, and it was highly diverse racially. The racial make-up of the school district during the time of this study was as follows: 22.9% African American, .03% American Indian, 15.2% Asian, 21.5% Hispanic, and 40.1% White. One fourth of the students within the district received free or reduced-price meals.

District Y began implementation of an Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System (A&S PGS) in the 2003-2004 school year with 50 principals. During the 2004-2005 school year, the implementation was expanded to all principals, school based administrators, and central office administrators. The school district described the purpose of the district's professional growth system for administrators as the following:

- Provides a comprehensive system for developing and evaluating administrators and supervisors;
- Sets clear expectations about the roles and responsibilities for each administrative and supervisory position;
- Describes professional growth opportunities to support and nurture all administrators and supervisors;
- Creates a dynamic structure for critical reflection, continuous improvement, and lifelong learning; and,
- Promotes personal ownership of professional development and incorporates self and peer appraisal.

The school district had developed a sequence of training programs to prepare future principals: the AP 1 program, the AP 2 program, and the internship. All of the candidates in these principal training programs had their initial licensure to be an assistant principal in the state in which the district resides. The programs began in the early1990s, prior to the existence of the comprehensive Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System (A&S PGS) created in the 2003-2004 school year, and have evolved over time due to budgetary constraints. Initially, cohort groups moved from the AP 1 program to the AP 2 program. After completing the AP 2 program, administrative candidates were considered assistant principals within the district. Assistant principals who were deemed ready to assume a principalship were invited to participate in the internship program.

The secondary AP1 and AP2 programs were for middle school and high school administrative candidates. Administrative candidates participated in a two-year program, which included participating in full-day monthly seminars as a cohort in addition to participating in a professional development team meeting with their principal, an outside principal consultant, and a central office supervisor. The professional development team met five times throughout the year for two hours each meeting. The AP 1 or AP 2 used this meeting to demonstrate proficiency on the school system's principal standards by sharing a portfolio of his or her work and reflecting with veteran district administrators and a mentor on the portfolio and related administrative experiences. Upon successful graduation from the AP2 program, candidates deemed ready were invited to participate in the third phase of the program, the

internship. This program was for experienced assistant principals, and it assisted these administrators with preparing for the principal interview process within the school district. The program also included a four-week internship program in which the administrative candidates assumed the responsibilities of the principalship.

METHODOLOGY

An input evaluation was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What resources (financial, facilities, human) were made available in the initial design of the secondary principal preparation program?
2. What resources (financial, facilities, human) were made available in the current implementation of the secondary principal preparation program?

Input evaluation identifies the resources and strategies needed to accomplish program goals and objectives (Gall et al., 1996). Stufflebeam et al. (2000) noted that input evaluations assess one's existing practice and whether or not the existing practice is appropriate compared to what is being done elsewhere or with what is proposed in educational research literature. The literature related to the development of aspiring principal programs identified the following resource considerations: principal candidate professional development, the internship experience, the cost to evaluate the program, and mentoring from experienced administrators (Bottoms et. al., 2004; Browne-Ferrigno, 2001; Educational Research Services, 2000; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE], 1998).

This component of the study relied on three primary sources of data: individual interviews, focus groups of principals, and document reviews. Interviews with executive staff members of the school district, including the district superintendent, deputy superintendent, chief financial officer, associate superintendent for human resources, associate superintendent for organizational development, the former associate superintendent for organizational development, the chief performance officer, and the former chief performance officer were conducted. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with the administrative union president and the director of secondary training. Focus groups were conducted with principals that had trained principal candidates in previous years, and internal financial documents and program descriptions were analyzed. Data were coded, chunked, and triangulated to search for patterns and draw conclusions.

Table 1 summarizes the research questions, data collection methods, and analysis procedures for this study.

Table 1:

Research Questions and Data Sources, Collection, and Analysis

Research question	Data source	Method of collection	Data analysis procedure
What resources (financial, facilities, human) were made available in the initial design of the secondary principal preparation program?	Executive staff Director of secondary training Principals	Personal interviews Focus group interviews Document review	Qualitative: Organize into patterns Look for patterns Draw conclusions
What resources (financial, facilities, human) were made available in the current design of the secondary principal preparation program?	Executive staff Director of secondary training Principals	Personal interviews Focus group interviews Document review	Qualitative: Organize into patterns Look for patterns Draw conclusions

FINDINGS

Records regarding the cost of the program at its inception were not available. The program had seen a change in leadership both with the associate superintendent for organizational development and the director of secondary leadership development. As a result, data from the programs early years were not accessible; however, a former executive staff member noted that resources of the program had not changed over time, with the exception of the program cutting "training representatives" from its budget. Training representatives were additional consultants that worked with the principal, outside principal consultant, and the central office supervisor on the developmental team. The training representatives' jobs were incorporated into the duties of the outside principal consultants when the training representative position was cut.

The total cost of implementing the secondary training program in District Y during the 2008-2009 school year was $471,761. This did not include the salary of the director of secondary leadership. The majority of these costs were for consultants that participated in the program. The consultant fees were approximately $440,819. A total of 105 individuals participated in the secondary principal training program during the 2008-2009 school year. The average cost per participant was $4,493. Based upon the financial documents analyzed, the secondary leadership development program was less expensive than other nationally job-embedded training programs. According to a 2005 case study conducted on a prominent national job-embedded training program, the total cost per participant for that program was $100,000. The total cost per participant for the district was $60,000, plus benefits. The total cost of private funding donated to the program was $2,000,000 (Clayton, Childress, & Peterkin, 2005). In comparison to this program, implementation of the secondary leadership training program in District Y was substantially less expensive. The executive staff member responsible for the operating budget shared that comparable training programs offered by a university would also be much more costly. Indeed, the cost of earning 12 graduate credits in education at the study state's flagship university was $5,328 during the 2008-2009 school year.

Further, the total cost of the program estimated by the district did not include the time invested by executive staff members and other employees throughout the school district to support the training of administrators. District Y effectively maximized the use of its existing personnel by having the majority of offices in the school system working with the secondary leadership training program--presenting system policies, procedures, and best practices to administrative candidates. In this way, the district "absorbed" the cost of the training program, rather than ascribed an additional cost to it.

Despite the apparent cost (versus budget) reductions over the years, the program was perceived to be meeting its goals. The superintendent of District Y was proud of the fact that the majority of principals within the district participated in the program. He stated, "We hire our own not because they are our own, but because they are the best candidates available" (Personal communication, May, 2008). Participants in the program perceived themselves to have moderately strong leadership skills. A review of the 2005-2006 organizational development annual report describing data on the performance of administrative interns revealed that 11 of 12 interns were selected for principal positions. In addition, 97% of the AP2s, 34 of 35 participants, and 100% of the AP1s, 28 of 28 participants, successfully demonstrated mastery on the school system standards.

Respondents noted only one major area of deficiency in the program – the internship. Difficulty in implementing an internship at the secondary level was a direct byproduct of the expense in providing that program feature. The internship is limited to one month in length and the number of internships offered by the district was limited to five per year since its inception due to the cost. System leaders and program participants all recognized the need to increase the number of internships and the amount of time of each internship, but they were not able to do so because of cost. Executive staff members shared that they would prefer to see the internship extend to a 9 week period at a minimum. The limited time did not give administrative interns time to address some of the tough, complex decisions principals make on a daily basis. One administrative intern shared:

I got a sense that my staff was just going to wait for any major decisions until my
principal returned because a 4-week period is so short, they could do that. So

perhaps it would have given more experience with working with staff on tough decisions because it would have given them more time to wait. I wasn't seeing nearly the issues I would face as a principal because they could wait out 4 weeks. (Aspiring principal intern A, personal communication, May, 2008)

"Grow your own" principal preparation programs can be cost effective in comparison to paying for an outside agency to develop a program for district participants. Much of the costs associated with "grow your own" principal preparation programs can be absorbed by utilizing district "experts" to serve as primary trainers. "Grow your own" programs assist with quality control and enable districts to effectively hire internal candidates for principal vacancies. In this way, they also reduce hiring costs. Yet, one major cost consideration for districts considering implementing a "grow your own" principal preparation program is the cost of implementing an extended, substantive internship program.

DISCUSSION

School districts concerned with finding high quality principals for their schools should consider developing their own principals through "grow your own" programs. School district "grow your own" programs need system-wide leadership to be successful (Joseph, 2009; Morrison, 2005), but if districts systemically incorporate such programs into their strategic plan as a form of succession planning, they have the potential to recruit and retain a talented workforce. The goals and outcomes of the program should be directly linked to the school district's strategic plan to ensure that it is a funding priority for the school system. As was the case with District Y, the budget for the "grow your own" programs can remain relatively stable, but the actual costs can be absorbed in the district in other ways, if the district strategically commits to maintaining the program over the long run. In this light, it is important for a system that is planning on implementing a "grow your own" program to have a well-designed strategic plan for the program. Program budgets should be realistic both with respect to costs but also program sustainability. A clearly articulated strategic plan for the program is essential to effective communication about the program and the program's intent to stakeholders.

The cost of implementing a secondary principal development training program in a school district can be manageable, if the school district is training large numbers of administrative candidates yearly. The average cost per participant of implementing the training program in the school district in this study during the 2008-2009 school year was approximately $4,493. This amount was relatively inexpensive considering that participants attended 10 full-day trainings in addition to two-hour professional development team meetings 5 times throughout the school year. The typical graduate school of education in the region in which this study was conducted requires 40 hours of class time for a graduate student to earn 3 credits. District Y's secondary training program exceeded 90 hours of development time and was less expensive. Hence, the program can be sold to district administrators as more value for less money.

For districts in dire financial situations, exploring opportunities to create a fee structure for participants that could be deducted through employee's payroll deductions in return for continuing education credits may be a solution to financing a training program. Many states allow school districts to offer courses to participants for continuing education credits (Roach, 2006). Requiring participants to bear a portion—or all—of the financial obligation associated with training is a viable option to addressing the financial concerns associated with establishing "grow your own" programs.

School districts seeking to implement a substantive internship program will need to consider creative options for minimizing the impact of the costs of such programs. The costs that are typically associated with implementing a fully-released internship experience include releasing the administrative candidate to assume an acting principal position for an interim time and paying the host principals' salaries while they are released from their principal duties to work on a school system project. One cost neutral option for school districts to consider is coordinating internship experiences between schools such that the principal of one school serves as an interim assistant principal in a cooperating school, thus allowing the assistant principal of the cooperating school to serve as the acting principal of the receiving school. The exchange would be a professional opportunity for both the intern and the cooperating principal as the cooperating principal could either provide support to the receiving school or conduct

action research within his or her own cooperating school. Either scenario provides opportunity for the cooperating principal to grow professionally and benefit the school. This exchange of personnel could provide district administrators with valuable insight into effective practices without costing the school district additional funds to pay for consultants to release administrators from their responsibilities. One concrete example of such an exchange would be for a principal of a high school that is not organized by smaller learning communities to visit, and perhaps serve as a visiting assistant principal for, a school that is organized by smaller learning communities. In this way, the principal has the opportunity to understand the processes, procedures, and resources that are associated with moving a school towards smaller learning communities while at the same time, vacating a position that can be temporarily filled by an intern. These immersion experiences, if structured and supported, could provide great learning opportunities for participants.

"Grow your own" programs' costs can be inflated through the fees of outside consults. In contrast, utilizing district administrators as "consultants" and mentors to aspiring principals can have the dual benefit of reducing out-of-pocket costs (marginal stipend versus full fee) as well as differentiating staffing and pay for principals. In difficult economic times, when cost of living increases for employees are politically difficult to obtain, an opportunity to structure additional stipends for principals to mentor and supervise administrative candidates is an attractive option. Interns would have the benefit of a structured mentoring program led by a sitting principal either in or outside the building to which they are assigned. School districts would benefit by paying a flat stipend to a principal versus an hourly rate of pay to an external consultant. Consultant principals would benefit by increased salary during difficult economic times when many districts are freezing administrator pay. Further, stipends are generally not subjected to the public scrutiny formal contractual salaries receive, as stipends often do not count towards pension formulas, thus, making them easier to implement.

School systems can also utilize the expertise of experienced assistant principals to serve as trainers and presenters in "grow your own" programs. One challenge of many school district training programs is that experienced assistant principals, if they do not assume a principalship immediately, do not receive support or attention. In District Y, for example, only five administrative candidates are considered for an internship. In a large school district with over 80 assistant principals with three or more years of experience, opportunities should be offered to assistant principals that are strong to share their expertise and be acknowledged for their contribution by developing others. Again, a stipend structure could be utilized that costs less than the fees associated with the use of external consultants. Equally as important, such a process would give assistant principals with experience opportunities to hone their leadership skills while training candidates on concrete topics. This would allow experienced assistant principals to demonstrate their abilities and be recognized in the larger political environment of the school district. Such exposure can lead them to be hired as a principal. In this way, the program would then be viewed as an ongoing professional development program for principals and experienced assistant principals to continue to learn and develop their skills while supporting others.

In these examples of utilizing existing capacity to develop new capacity, stipends can also be thought of broadly. For example, districts can pay for trainers to attend local or national conferences to continue to develop their skills. Stipends can also take the form of school-based grant money and internships in other levels of the system such as the central office or superintendent's office for principals who have such career aspirations.

There are numerous benefits for a district that decides to create a "grow your own" principal training program. Building the capacity of principal candidates requires planning and visionary thinking. The costs associated with developing a "grow your own" principal training program are minimal, and as difficult economic times plague school districts, these programs can survive with proper planning. School districts that chose not to develop the capacity of their leadership have missed an opportunity at ensuring a high level of quantity and quality control within their districts.

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