PLANNING STRATEGIES TO FILL PRINCIPAL VACANCIES:
THE ISSUES AND SOME CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

Superintendents, personnel directors and school boards across the nation are faced with a growing problem of locating high caliber replacements for the exodus of school principals that began as we entered the decade of the 1990s. This departure, which began as natural attrition due to age and retirement, has been accelerated by several other factors including working conditions, educational reform and lack of funding for educators and educational programs. Since principals are critical to school success and student performance an examination of principal selection strategies is critical, particularly the planning needed to find the best applicants. There are several selection strategies that superintendents and school boards can use to recruit and employ the best candidates available, including "grow your own" prospective principals.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the United States, there is a demand for effective, qualified principals (Kwan, 2012). Applicants are available, but finding those candidates who can address the complex issues and demands faced by principals is becoming more and more difficult for school district officials (Doyle & Locke, 2014). The principal is ultimately responsible for the success of the school and student performance (Miller, 2013). Applicant pools are thinning; potential candidates see no real incentive to become school principals (Perkins, 2016). Finding high quality applicants who can increase the performance of students and teachers is daunting (Sincar, 2013). The process has become more complex when attempting to recruit and hire principals who have the desire for leadership and the capability to lead schools in today's challenging environment (Tran & Bon, 2016).

With principal evaluations based on student and teacher performance, potential candidates see no incentive to move into the administrative ranks (Fuller, Hollingsworth & Young, 2015). Many schools opened recent school years without principals or with acting principals (School Leaders Network 2014). Candidates are often available for the positions, but finding those who can address today's multifaceted issues and difficulties is becoming more and more difficult for local school officials (Ellis & Brown, 2015). Certified candidates are available, but hiring personnel are finding out there is a definite difference in "qualified" and "certified" (Stone-Johnson, 2014). Often thought of as the pool of candidates for these missing school principals is America's public school teachers, but one half of today's teachers will leave the profession over the next decade (Pilar, 2016). Many of these teachers are highly qualified and are certified in educational leadership but simply do not have the desire to be a principal (Simon, 2015).

PRINCIPAL SHORTAGE

Notwithstanding the importance of the school principal, a global crisis faces public schools: a distressing shortage of principals who are willing and qualified to meet the current and future

needs of public school students (Monroe, 2013). As the role of the principal continues to evolve, it is dramatically influenced by changing educational policies, governmental reform, increased accountability, current events, changing technology and the globalization of society (Hutton, 2014). The quality of education received by students is critically dependent upon the effectiveness of the school principal (Allen, Grigsby & Peters, 2015; Tran & Buckman, 2017). The principal as an instructional leader is the most influential factor in creating a successful school environment and a quality school. Principals are the architects who design and construct an environment conducive to learning (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; McCleary, Crow & Matthews, 2013; Yang, 2014).

Researchers indicate that more than 30 percent of all principal leave their current principalship each year due to retirement, movement outside education, transfer, or promotion (Perkins, 2016; Yan, 2016). At the same time many states are improving retirement benefits and including early retirement enticements which affect principals as well as teachers. These factors alone provide a gloomy picture, but when combined with many inflexible, state bound, retirement plans, the picture grows much darker for school superintendents as they attempt to replace departing principals (Bjork & Richardson, 1997; Goldring & Taie, 2014; Li, 2012).

As the principalship develops and the demands increase, principal turnover throughout the nation increases (Battle 2010). The pressures to meet state and federal standards may directly or indirectly influence why some principals leave their positions (Li, 2012; Reames, Kochan, & Linxiang, 2014). However, most leave willingly, with higher rates of turnover reported at schools with high minority, low-income, and low-achieving student populations (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). The shortage of qualified applicants to fill principal vacancies across the United States has been well documented (Zepada, Bengtson & Parylo, 2012). Principal turnover rates across the nation average approximately 30% annually, with schools serving high poverty, low-achieving, majority minority populations at the higher end of the range (Fuller, Young & Baker 2011). Poorly performing schools and those with a high concentration of poor students experience much higher principal turnover rates and are also unable to attract experienced new principals when vacancies arise (Beteille et al., 2012; Goldring & Taie, 2014).

Many experienced school leaders are retiring and school districts need to be able to replace these leaders and also "attract the best and the brightest school leaders to sustain high performing schools and turn-around low-performing schools" (Harchar & Campbell, 2010, pp. 93-94). As the average principal approaches retirement age and the number of principals needed continues to increase, there is concern that there may not be enough school leaders to fill position vacancies (Wells, 2013). The reluctance of some educators who complete principal preparation programs to apply for available principalships contributes to this concern about the adequacy of the supply of future principals (Mitchell-Austin, 2015). There are far more educators with administrative credentials than are applying for principal positions (Hewett, Denny & Pijanowski, 2011).

The current realities of the principalship, the numerous reasons for shortages, and the high turnover require a change to recruiting, development, and personnel practices for school districts (Pilar, 2016). Principal turnover can also have a detrimental impact on school improvement where rapid succession events occur (Spiro, 2013). Practitioners and researchers have offered many explanations for principal shortages and high turnover rates (Zepeda, Bengtson, & Parylo, 2012). Low retention rates can be attributed to increased responsibilities and accountability and lack of support (Zepeda et al., 2012). Many teachers and possible school leaders, even those who have credentials, are not interested in serving as principal (Kirsch, 2015). Principal salary and compensation are not always commensurate with the responsibilities (Stone-Johnson, 2014) and there may be only a small pay differential between administrators and teachers. New standards for

principal licensing also compound principal recruitment (Yan, 2016). The intensity of the job has changed and developed, requiring principals to spend more time fulfilling their myriad of duties and making the principalship much less desirable as a career choice (Perkins, 2016; Zepeda, 2013).

THE PRINCIPALSHIP IS NOT ATTRACTIVE

There are many reasons why educators pursue principal certification but do not pursue principal positions (Tyre, 2015). Principal applicants must weigh the cost for administrative positions, and decide if the compensation in the form of salary, benefits, and authority of the position is worth the time and responsibility involved (Cellini, 2016). Many factors, such as current job situation, family situation, and the support system in place, contribute to this decision (Hutton, 2014).

Alongside rising mandated reforms and responsibilities, school leaders also face increased demands of accountability for improved student achievement (Barnett, Soho & Oleszewski, 2012). Over the past two decades as a response to the managerial imperative and rising demands around student achievement, numerous scholars, philanthropists, policymakers, and educational supervisors have increasingly called on principals to better assume the role of instructional leader, and focus attention to instructional matters over managerial tasks (Coelli, & Green, 2012; Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Because the principalship is not as attractive as it once was, school districts are experiencing difficulty recruiting principal applicants of the quality needed to lead schools in this turbulent time of change (Molina & Claudet, 2015).

ISSUES FOR THE DISTRICTS

There is a crisis in principal selection due to demographic and personal issues fueled by a demanding environment that is forcing fundamental reconsideration about how to recruit and develop new principals (Grisson, Loeb & Mitani, 2015). Growing concerns over perceived shortages of qualified and willing principal candidates in the near future have compelled district administrators to examine new alternative techniques that will increase the quality and quantity of school principal candidates who are willing and able to accept the increasing challenges (Ellis & Brown, 2015).

Numerous researchers have demonstrated a strong connection between high-quality principals and high-performing schools (Duhey & Smith, 2014; Spiro, 2013; Yang, 2014). Without adequate numbers of highly-qualified applicants to replace retiring principals, district leaders will have a difficult time succeeding with educational improvement activities, primarily increasing student achievement (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2013).

Local districts often do not have a sufficient pool of certified administrative personnel waiting in the wings, much less well qualified potential principals (Cray & Weiler, 2011). And, while neighboring districts may have a large certified applicant pool, the candidates may be immobile, or perceive no incentive to change districts. The university class is perhaps the poorest of all since most students in administration preparation programs are practicing educators and are currently employed (Hooker, 2000; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

The proportionally small number of minorities currently in administrative positions and an ever-decreasing number of minorities who are in preparation programs are adding to the replacement dilemma faced by many superintendents and school. This predicament should act as a catalyst to motivate superintendents to develop long range plans for meeting the administrator demands of the 21st century (Tran & Bon, 2016). One of the first questions which should be addressed is: Where to find future principals? Do future principals come from the ranks of the local school district, from outside the district, or from the graduate program at the university?

PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

Principal turnover often signals the end of not only existing formal leadership for school improvement but also the gains of previous success (Kabungaidze, Mahlatshana & Nigirande, 2013). A change of direction accompanying a change in the formal leadership of the school frequently results in growing cynicism on the part of teachers toward proposed school improvement initiatives (Lemoine, McCormack & Richardson, 2014). Additionally, principal turnover is increasing dramatically due to retirements, difficulties of principal retention in urban and challenging settings, the choice of principals to move before improvements are sustained, and the practice of rotation (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013). Decreased job satisfaction among principals has also had an impact (Kabungaidze et al, 2013; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). These changes have resulted in an untenable position for school districts who need qualified principals to implement school improvement initiatives but increased demands and accountability has led to fewer applicants and principal turnover (LeFevre & Robinson, 2014; Reames, Kochan & Zhu, 2014).

Principal turnover may create instability in schools and thwart improvement efforts (Wildy, Pepper & Guanzhong, 2011)). Frequency in principal turnover results in lower teacher retention, lower student achievement gains, and lower ability to attract experienced successors (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012).

PLANNING IS CRITICAL

The methods and processes for principal selection have not notably changed in many decades (Doyle & Locke, 2014). As the role of the principal has markedly increased in scope and responsibility, the methods school districts use must change to meet the demands for a different kind of principal candidate (Kottkamp, 2011; Palmer, 2016). Planning for principal selection is imperative to recruit skilled candidates and retain effective individuals who can lead a school on the path of success (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). A shortage of certified and qualified candidates is a concern school district administrators confront to fill vacancies due to retirements, resignations, or promotions. The dual concerns about principal shortages and the quality of new principal hires remain an issue. Hine (2013), noted that "with large numbers of individuals already leaving school administration, districts are experiencing difficulty replacing those leaving, and finding that the replacements often lack the necessary skills required for school administration" (p. 275). It is also important to recognize that the increasing demands upon the work life of a school principal may contribute to the shortage of applicants resulting in fewer individuals attracted to the principalship (Escalante, 2016; LeFevre & Robinson, 2014).

Superintendents and school boards need a plan which provides some assurance of quality personnel. Therefore, planning for future principal selection should include the following strategies (Escalante, 2016; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015; Richardson, Petrie & Flanigan, 1994):

1. Anticipate the vacancies that are likely to occur over the short and long term. Surveys of administrative staff should help to some extent. These can be paper-pencil surveys for large districts or interviews for smaller districts or online surveys for all districts.

2. Plan for anticipated vacancies by encouraging prospective administrators to gain proper certification and by providing on-the-job training through committee work, learning opportunities such as conferences, and special assignments such as acting in temporary administrative vacancies.

3. Superintendents and local school boards should recognize that administrative preparation programs are growing more demanding and candidates may take two, three, or more years to complete a quality program. Consequently, the lag time between identification and certification must be anticipated and calculated.

4. Superintendents must also recognize that more rigorous preparation programs, including more STRINGENT entry and exit requirements, are producing a new breed of educational administrator. These new candidates have strong backgrounds in instructional preparation coupled with required evaluation and management skills. These candidates have different expectations of students, staff and superiors, and can be expected to operate successfully in a variety of administrative situations.

5. The new more exacting and demanding preparation programs will produce fewer candidates for administrative positions. There are fewer applicants for positions and many employment pools have very few applicants.

Whether the superintendent and local school board decide to "grow their own" applicants or import from another source, the need for a long range employment plan necessitates a systematic procedure for identifying, attracting, employing, and maintaining the highest quality principals (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Identification procedures designed to look beyond the district are different than for identifying local personnel. A pool of applicants is probably available for any principal vacancy. However, many of the applicants may have also applied for the last fifty administrative openings in the district. The key is to identify those candidates who are the best prospects for the local, individual school (English, Papa, Mullen & Creighton, 2012). Certainly a variety of selection techniques should be utilized, and the stereotypical "good-ole-boys" network should be discarded (Cohen-Vogel, 2011). Successful superintendents match the needs of the school with the perceived strengths of the applicants. However, superintendents should never forget that all roads lead to improvement of the "teaching-learning" act (McKinney, Lobat & Lobat, 2015; Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh & Horner, 2014), and should consequently examine their philosophy regarding equifinality of school administration (Russell & Sabina, 2014).

WHERE DO DISTRICTS FIND PRINCIPALS?

Where will school districts obtain future principals? Do future principals come from the ranks of the local school district, from outside the district, or from the graduate program at a university? The answers to these questions are critical to most school districts. Local districts often do not have a sufficient pool of certified administrative personnel waiting in the wings, much less well qualified potential principals (DeArmond, Denice & Campbell, 2014). And, while neighboring districts may have a large certified applicant pool, the candidates may be immobile, or perceive no incentive to change districts (Ash, Hodge & Connell, 2013). The university-based applicant pool is perhaps the poorest of all since most students in administration preparation programs are practicing educators and are currently employed (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2011).

Some advocate the "Burger King" principal approach, meaning that administration is generic and the skills necessary to succeed as the manager of a Burger King would qualify one to become an administrator in a P-12 school. Obviously there are some serious problems with this approach, but it is indeed being used in some school districts. This concept is often fed by the success of one or two former military leaders who made the successful transition to the superintendency of a large city; however, it overlooks the massive number of other similar attempts that have proven far less successful (Lemoine, McCormack & Richardson, 2014).

Models of Principal Attraction
Catch as catch can
Some school districts simply wait like the Venus Fly Trap and attempt to ensnare the most viable principal candidates. The real problem here is a lack of selectivity and planning. Without

some job analysis, almost anyone who is certified would qualify as a principal (Myung, Loeb & Horng, 2011). Districts await the application of a candidate or small cadre of candidates that are "perfect for the job." However, because little to no advanced planning has been done in order to ascertain what would make for "the perfect candidate," the central office personnel either hire inappropriately or find virtually no candidates willing to submit an application for employment (Pijanowski, Hewitt & Brady, 2009).

Grow your own

Districts should and can create partnerships with local universities for the preparation and development of aspiring administrators (Bjork & Richardson, 1997). More urban schools have developed these partnerships than have other (i.e., rural and suburban schools. School districts should also actively seek out and encourage women and minorities to become principals. Some districts use Teacher Cadets as an incentive for the development of future teachers; a similar, more advanced program, would provide a useful model for the identification and selection of potential administrators. In addition, school districts should "socialize future administrators" (Gurley, Anast-May & Lee, 2015). into the positive aspects of administration. Many good teachers do not seek principal possibilities because they do not self-identify with the position of principal or assistant principal (Finneran, 2016). Active mentorship and recruitment strategies hold potential for significantly increasing this self-identification process (Corcoran, Schwartz & Weinstein, 2012).

Active recruitment

Some districts have decided that the best alternative is to go outside the local school district and attempt to locate administrators in other districts and attract them through financial and/or programmatic incentives (DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012; Martinez, 2015). A few districts are using "headhunters" to help locate potential principals. Many are also using national advertising and the internet as a means of attracting applicants.

Selective succession

Some districts have developed long range plans for administrator vacancies and have, in turn, identified the "anointed" person to become the new administrator. Although this method has found disfavor in some locations, other systems use the method as a means of guaranteeing the availability of quality administrators. Here, the flaw in such appointment strategies can be twofold. First, in many districts, the "anointed" individual may not be the best candidate, but rather, a typical reproduction of what has always been the model for principalship behavior. Secondly, the selected candidate often only has been identified from a very small pool of internal candidates (Clifford, 2012). Using this strategy, teacher personnel often are heard saying, "Is this the best we can do for a new principal?" (Davis, Gooden & Bowers, 2017)

OTHER ALTERNATIVES

Beyond the basic employment problem are other approaches to the issue of principal losses. School district reorganization, to take advantage of fewer personnel, could be a possibility. Principals might serve more than a single school in some districts (Wood, Finch & Mirecki, 2013).

Another approach may be the use of differentiated staffing patterns among administrators. Differentiated staffing is not currently a well-accepted practice for teachers or principals, but it may prove especially effective for districts where outstanding and highly trained administrators are

scarce, or where inexperienced principals need the close supervision of an executive principal or mentor (Spillane & Kenney, 2012). Mentoring is an excellent training device for any new principal. While giving incentive to strong leadership, differentiated staffing could also serve as a vehicle to justify differentiated salaries, thereby permitting the superintendent and local school board to attract high quality leaders and encourage the less able principals to improve (Vogelm 2015).

The assistant principalship is the best training ground for future administrators (Davis, Gooden & Bowers, 2017), but many assistant principals are now choosing to become "career bound" and not aspire to the principalship (Clifford, 2012). The assistant principalship is currently viewed with more favor than ever before. If assistant principals choose to remain, for many years, if not for an entire career, as an assistant, the opportunity to "grow your own" will significantly be hampered (Fink, 2011; Retelle, 2010). Also, these men and women who know schools exceptionally well, will, in a more frequent manner, be working for principals who know far less about a school or school system (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

School districts must be proactive in the identification and selection of principals. The "grow your own" concept has worked in a number of school districts with great success. But to rely on one strategy, in a limited employment market, can prove extremely dangerous. New and different strategies must be investigated for the employment of outstanding school leaders. If proactive, non-traditional, employment strategies are not implemented, some districts will be forced to employ only the certified, not the truly qualified candidates for employment.

In conclusion, superintendents should begin planning for the impending administrative turnover and anticipate a "new breed" of administrators by developing plans to attract and retain the best and most capable administrators. The job of school leader has been transformed by unexpected economic, demographic, technological, and global change. Therefore, there is no doubt about why so much attention is given to school principal selection because leadership and professional knowledge serve as the guiding forces for the development and perseverance of a successful school.

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