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Author: Lashway, Larry
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Finding Leaders for Hard-to-Staff Schools. ERIC Digest.

Several years ago, a flurry of surveys, reports, and policy documents took note of what appeared to be a looming shortage of school leaders. Despite the gloomy predictions of crisis that then filled the air, the leadership pipeline has continued to flow reliably

enough to let most districts fill their vacancies with qualified candidates, and many analysts now believe that severe shortages are comparatively rare (Susan Gates and colleagues 2003; Marguerite Roza and colleagues 2003).

For those schools perennially in search of leadership, however, being in the statistical minority is little consolation. These "hard-to-staff" schools are often characterized by high-poverty students, low test scores, high staff turnover, and unusually large numbers of teachers who are inexperienced, provisionally certified, or teaching out of field. Such schools need exceptionally well-qualified principals, but some have trouble attracting any candidates.

Although the extent of the problem is not completely clear, No Child Left Behind is likely to worsen it. Schools with the most problems will feel the greatest performance pressure, making leadership positions even less desirable.

Because most research on hard-to-staff schools has focused on teacher supply, any recommendations on alleviating leadership shortages necessarily remain tentative. This Digest reviews the available evidence and discusses likely ways that districts can improve the supply of qualified principal candidates.

HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM?

While troubled schools are presumed to have unusual difficulty attracting qualified principals, the dimension of the problem is surprisingly hard to measure. Shortages of qualified teachers at hard-to-staff schools are relatively easy to document, leaving little doubt that schools with high proportions of poor children and minorities are far more likely than other schools to have teachers who are inexperienced or teaching out of their field (Cynthia Prince, January 2002; Craig Jerald 2002).
Comparable statistics for principals are harder to find. In one study, Frank Papa and colleagues (2002) found that low-performing schools in New York were more likely to have principals who were less experienced or who had attended less competitive colleges. Gates and colleagues, after reviewing federal School and Staffing Survey data, found no evidence that experienced principals were avoiding schools that had higher percentages of low-income students. The researchers did note that less experienced principals were more likely to report being in a school with problems such as vandalism, physical conflict, student disrespect, and possession of weapons.

In general, evidence suggests considerable variation in candidate supply. In a sampling of eighty-three mostly metropolitan districts around the country, Roza and colleagues found that the average district reported seventeen applicants for principal positions, but the range was from four to forty-plus.

Causes of shortages also vary. Some are explained by rapid population growth or geographic isolation; in those cases the scarcity of applicants is districtwide.

Hard-to-staff schools, by contrast, often coexist with other district schools that have little trouble attracting good leaders. The reasons are complex and not always easy to sort out. Most obviously, troubled schools present severe professional challenges that may discourage potential applicants.

Another possibility is suggested by an analysis of teacher retention in Texas (Erik Hanushek and colleagues 2001). The study found that white teachers tended to transfer to schools with higher proportions of white students, whereas the reverse was true for nonwhite teachers. If the same pattern holds for principals, schools with high minority enrollments would be more likely to experience a dearth of candidates, since the great majority of principals are white.

WHAT RECRUITING STRATEGIES ARE EFFECTIVE?

Traditionally, when a vacancy notice draws little response from potential applicants, districts boost recruitment efforts by broadcasting the postings over a wider geographic area or taking out bigger ads. Keeping in mind that research on district recruitment practices is scanty, states and districts with hard-to-staff schools may be turning to more proactive "grow-your-own" approaches.
The BELL program of the David Douglas School District (Portland, Oregon) provides a typical example of how school districts can improve the pool of principal candidates by identifying, recruiting, and training prospective principals from within the district's teacher corps (Oregon School Boards Association).

The BELL project (Building Education Leaders Locally) began with a class examining the district's culture, operations, and priorities. The class, taught by district administrators and supervisors, was followed by action-research projects, group leadership projects (such as serving on district committees), administrator internships, and mentoring of new administrators. Three years later, five of the original forty-three participants occupied administrative positions (three in the district); eight had gained experience by serving as administrative interns or by overseeing summer programs; and sixteen were in the process of earning administrative certification.

The district's success may be due to more than the mechanics of the program. Superintendent Barbara Rommel noted, "The culture here has always looked first within, encouraging teachers to get their administrative certificate and to seek administrative positions in the district.

DO FINANCIAL INCENTIVES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Personnel shortages invariably raise the issue of salaries. Can hard-to-staff schools draw more interest simply by raising pay for principals? The answer is not completely clear, but there are indications that higher salaries and similar incentives could at least be part of the solution.
The issue is not that principal salaries are low. Gates and colleagues found that while there were considerable variations from state to state, the average public-school principal in 1999 was paid a little over $65,000 a year, a 9 percent gain in real wages since 1988. The real issue may be relative compensation. Today's principalship is more complex, time-consuming, and stressful than ever before, especially at troubled schools. Under such conditions, higher salaries provide a tangible symbol that the greater effort is recognized and appreciated.

How much added salary would it take to attract principals to an especially challenging school? No precise answer is possible, though most analysts believe the increment needs to be significant before it will have an impact. Hanushek and colleagues estimated that the differential would have to be as much as 20 to 50 percent over comparable positions at other schools.

Raises of that magnitude are beyond the means of many districts. Prince (June 2002) has suggested schools can work with businesses and other government agencies to supplement salary with other incentives, such as relocation assistance, reduced rent or utilities, reduced-price homes, and tax credits.

Principals' compensation is also relative to teacher compensation. Teachers considering a move into administration may be put off by the realization that the principal's higher salary is offset by longer hours and greater stress. Some principals are well paid compared to teachers, but others are not (Gates and colleagues).

HOW CAN THE JOB BE MADE MORE SATISFYING?

Given the unlikelihood that salary alone is the solution, districts may modify the other side of the equation by upgrading work conditions. As job quality improves, salary is likely to become less of a factor (Hanushek and colleagues).
Sheryl Boris-Schacter and Sondra Langer (2002), after interviewing hundreds of principals, have concluded that the job should be modified to alleviate some of the stress and time pressures that school leaders face. They suggest that districts could spread the burden by reconfiguring the job description, either through a co-principalship, a rotating principalship, or some other form of distributed leadership.

Where this kind of restructuring is not possible, districts or states can provide temporary relief by teaming the principal with an experienced mentor. The Southern Regional Education Board (2003) has noted that a number of states have leadership academies

aimed at providing assistance and training for principals in low-performing schools.

The principals interviewed by Boris-Schacter and Langer also spoke of the need for sharing, reflection, and indepth professional development that could be built into the work week. Examples include school visitations, meetings with community-based groups, and attendance at support groups.

Efforts to improve job conditions should not overlook the idealistic orientation of many educators, who entered the field because they wanted to make a difference. Diana Pounder and Randall Merrill (2001) found that when assistant principals were asked to consider the desirability of a high school principalship, they gave the most weight to psychological benefits, particularly the opportunity to influence education. From that perspective, the opportunity to lead a troubled school may actually be an incentive-but only if the position provides the authority and support to focus on instructional improvement.

ARE NONTRADITIONAL CANDIDATES THE ANSWER?

If schools can't find qualified candidates in the traditional candidate pool, should they look elsewhere? Should they assume that only former teachers who have gone through a university administration program can do the job? A spate of recent reports have in fact recommended widening the career gateway.
Advocates such as Frederick Hess (2003) claim that many individuals with leadership skills acquired in other fields would be willing to tackle a school principalship if they were not barred by traditional certification requirements. Devising alternative pathways or doing away with certification rules altogether could dramatically expand the talent pool.

Can someone without school experience or specialized training be considered qualified? Several recent studies at the University of Washington have advanced that view. Bradley Portin and colleagues (2003) interviewed principals from a wide spectrum of schools and concluded that the principal's one essential leadership skill was diagnosing and acting on the needs of the school. Some other necessary leadership functions require special knowledge (such as instructional leadership), but these, say the authors, could be exercised by others in the school. The principal's job was to see that the job got done, not to personally accomplish it.

Roza and colleagues found signs that superintendents valued other qualities ahead of teaching experience. Responding to a forced-choice question, 83 percent chose "experience leading professional colleagues" as the most important requirement, whereas just 14 percent chose classroom teaching experience. The researchers did not ask whether superintendents would consider hiring a principal with no teaching

experience, which is a somewhat different question.

With no research data serving as a guide, educators seem to be skeptical. In Michigan, which did away with certification requirements in 1996, anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of districts have continued to hire certified principals (Jeff Archer 2002). The pressures of No Child Left Behind may reinforce this wariness because the law's urgent demands leave little margin for newcomers to leisurely assimilate a whole new professional culture.

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