Preparing the Next Generation of School Administrators: Advice from Veteran Leaders

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to systematically gather advice and insights from veteran school leaders on how to prepare and support the next generation of educational administrators through professional development and mentoring programs. Two hundred school administrators who were members of the American Association of School Administrators were randomly selected for an open-ended survey consisting of questions pertaining to the adequacy of professional preparation and the role of professional development and mentoring activities in promoting and sustaining sound leadership skills. Surveys returned by eighty veteran school administrators—principals, assistant superintendents or superintendents-- who had a minimum of five years of educational leadership experience, were considered. This resulted in a high usable survey response rate of .40. Through the analysis of the in-depth open-ended responses using rigorous qualitative methodology, several common themes related to professional preparation emerged from this study: (1) coursework that was designed to link theory with praxis was most valuable to future leadership success; (2) instructors who were themselves experienced practitioners appeared better able to connect text and class material with real world application; and (3) a limited foundation in the social sciences—psychology, political sciences, public relations, cultural diversity, conflict management, and change management-- appears to be missing from the school leadership curriculum. Study findings also suggest that the veteran respondents hold similar views on how best to support administrators once they join the profession: (4) through fostering networking opportunities with colleagues from across the region, state or country; (5) by encouraging the formation of mentoring relationships whenever possible; and (6) by promoting professional development activities, like study groups, that minimize time away from the job while maximizing time devoted to the specific applicable material. Collectively these results suggest that veteran school leaders have common views on how the next generation should be prepared and supported. Organizations and institutions of higher education should consider these findings when designing appropriate academic and professional development experiences for aspiring and veteran educational administrators alike.

Introduction

Raising accountability standards for public schools has become widely popular since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983 (Shumaker, 2004; Donaldson, 2001). The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is but the most recent legislation designed to promote one version of school improvement: higher student performance on standardized tests. Although the desired goals of school reform are subject to debate and vary from constituency to constituency, there is little doubt that as school accountability standards are ratcheted ever higher so too will be the challenges associated with succeeding in school leadership roles (Schlechty, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Schlechty, 1997). Depending upon whether rural or urban statistics are used, building level school

administrators and superintendents can expect to remain in one assignment for five years or less (Schuman, 2004; Morton, 2003). These statistics, coupled with high projected retirement rates for the present pool of seasoned administrators, supports what school administrators are presenting witnessing: there is and will continue to be considerable turnover of building principals and school superintendents for the foreseeable future. Supporting aspiring and new administrators will then be more challenging than in the past, given their large numbers and the decreasing group of veterans able to mentor them into their respective roles. Finding ways to collect and capture advice from seasoned administrators will be important to addressing some of these challenges.

Methods

The present study employed the scientifically based survey construction process delineated by Fink & Kosecoff (1998) complete with pilot study. A comprehensive survey instrument was developed through this process that consisted of a pool of 20 open-ended questions that encouraged veteran school administrators to offer a comprehensive examination of their views of their profession. Four separate survey forms, each containing five questions, were then developed in order to minimize the amount of time necessary for any individual school administrator to complete his/her final questionnaire. To find suitable subjects for inclusion in this study, the researchers purchased a membership list from the American Association of School Administrators, a nationally known and reputable professional association for school leaders. Two hundred school administrators evenly distributed across the nation were initially selected as potential co-researchers to receive this first version (Form A) of the survey and demographic questionnaire for this study. Incomplete surveys and surveys from administrators who lacked five years of experience or building or district level leadership experience (defined as serving or had served as a principal, assistant superintendent or superintendent of schools) were not considered. Of the ninety-two returned surveys, eighty were deemed to be appropriate for analysis, resulting in a useable return rate of .40. Patton's (2002) rigorous theme-based qualitative research methodology framework was used to analyze selected responses.

Results

Eighty seasoned public school administrators from around the United States, with an average of 20 years of experience in leadership, took the time to offer their collective advice to new and aspiring colleagues who will assume administrative roles in today's schools.

Two topics that were particularly germane to a discussion of leadership were the adequacy of professional preparation prior to assuming an administrative post and the role of networking, mentoring and professional development in supporting new leaders.

How well did veteran leaders feel that their "formal" academic preparation prepared them for "real life" leadership? There was a high degree of commonality among their answers. What was most valuable to them fell into three broad categories. The first was their exposure to coursework that steeped them in the theory and history of school leadership itself. Reading about various theories and models of leadership gave

them an opportunity to reflect on their own leadership styles, and setting contemporary theories into a broader historical context was critical, as one respondent noted, because "understanding where things come from is essential to providing leadership that goes anywhere."

Another valuable component of their education was a "hands on practical understanding," the nuts and bolts of management: courses in budgeting, school finance, and the "politics" of the job. This curriculum was even more meaningful if delivered by an experienced practitioner currently holding an administrative post. Scenario building and group problem solving activities were mentioned as classroom methods that best supplemented presentations by savvy practitioners.

Finally, field-based experience was highly rated. Internships, shadowing skilled practitioners, visiting quality schools, and participating in apprenticeship programs all were mentioned as invaluable aids to master. As one said, pre-service administrators desire "quality practical experience components, ideally with release from the classroom, not just little 'teacher leadership' projects." Novices wished for even more opportunities to design programs, role play and receive critiques, engage in case study analyses, and take part in Q and A sessions with a diverse group of leaders.

Interestingly, where their preparation fell the shortest was in its general lack of a broad social sciences foundation. What did administrators most wish they had been exposed to? Courses in psychology, human relations, cultural diversity, public relations, conflict resolution, and change management. One summed up their recommendations as requiring a standard curriculum drawn from "guidance/counseling preparation, as they teach listening skills, empathic approaches to people, and human problem solving."

If formal coursework left potential leaders somewhat lacking in their preparation to assume the reins of real schools, what could have assisted them in this difficult transition? Seasoned veterans saw networking and mentoring as a "survival necessity," as one put it. Most report that they themselves belong to at least one formalized professional network at the state or county level; where geography is a barrier to more frequent face-to-face meetings—as it frequently does for rural administrators—veterans have "networked through the internet professional organizations" as well. Regional meetings and professional conferences provide a venue both for the formal exchange of information and successful strategies, as well as "informal networking at the hospitality room that can really open doors, and establish friendships." Veterans emphasize the importance of being connected, since they are confronted with frequent change and endure high levels of stress not best managed in isolation. As one observes of his informal support system: "we get together on a regular basis for our mutual sanity!"

Few of the informants report that they had mentors when they stepped into their initial roles. The few who did benefit from mentoring forged relationships with their predecessors or with retired superintendents in their districts. Others began the journey alone, learning "by the seat of your pants." All felt that a more formalized system of mentoring during a new leader's first years would be a tremendous asset. Ideally, a structured buddy system, augmented by group gatherings in which experienced administrators provide novices with "information that they have learned to be absolutely essential to survival as an administrator," could ease the transition into leadership. One administrator also proposed the concept of a "summer mentor" who "could review a couple of years of board agendas and explain and interpret the rhythm of a typical year"

for the rookie. While citing challenges such as time, goodness of fit between mentor and mentee, and the necessity of mentor training for the veterans, all urged that mentoring become standard practice.

When asked what professional development experiences had been most meaningful to them, a number of informants said "none." What appears to work best for busy administrators are workshops "with a more explicit agenda," that provide specific information and skill building with immediate application to the everyday running of schools, and do so in a very short time. Administrators bemoan the type of workshop or conference that takes several days to produce only a small amount of applicable learning. As one stated bluntly: ""I need concise professional development to help me do a better job for my school district. Theory can be obtained from the University." As administrators became more seasoned, though, they took on a larger role in creating their own meaningful professional development. For example, one administrative team formed a study group, choosing texts to read and discuss collectively. Another participated in a multi-year leadership cadre; benefits included both the exchange of ideas and being "forced o create the time to participate."

<u>Conclusions</u>

Given current difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified school leaders in our country, it behooves us to consider the findings of this survey and base recommendations for change on the experiences of veteran leaders. Among these recommendations are:

1. The creation of more transdisciplinary professional preparation programs that ground prospective administrators both in leadership theory and managerial skills, and in the human relations and counseling skills needed to work successfully with school and community.
2. The use of skilled current practitioners, quality school sites, and hands on simulations, case study work, and critique to augment theoretical learning.
3. The creation of structured mentoring programs to provide trained mentors to support novices during the first years of their tenure.
4. The encouragement of networking, through building-based and out-of-building collaborations to mitigate stress and isolation in leadership positions.
5. The use of seasoned administrators to design and deliver meaningful professional development to new leaders.

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