

A Comparison of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Principal Leadership

Skills by Campus Student Achievement Level

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Abstract

Because of the importance of developing highly skilled school leaders, statewide assessments of 784 Texas public school administrators were compared to determine how leadership skills varied by type of campus (urban, suburban and rural) and by campus student achievement ratings. Important findings indicate differences exist by campus type and by campus student academic achievement as measured by state accountability ratings. In particular, leadership skills of urban, suburban, and rural principals at campuses with the state's highest student academic achievement ratings differ from skills of principal at schools with lower student academic achievement ratings.

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Introduction

As previously reviewed (Winn, Erwin, Gentry, & Cauble, 2009a, 2009b), twenty five years of education research confirms that quality school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in influencing student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Lesotte, 1992, 1991). As school administrator responsibilities continue to increase worldwide, development of effective school leadership is requisite (Olson, 2008). Consequently, targeting specific leadership skills related to student achievement might, ultimately, improve student academic performance in urban, suburban, and rural schools.

Special Challenges for Urban, Suburban, and Rural Principals

Literature related to the urban principalship focuses on four challenges (Winn, et.al, 2009b): low SES/high minority population (Nevarez & Wood, 2007; Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, & Chapman, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2006); inexperienced teachers (Humphrey, Koppich, & Hough 2005; Courtney & Coble, 2005); and increasing numbers of dropouts and loss of students (and related revenue) to charter schools (May, 2007; Jewell, 2004; Lewis, 2004).

Recent suburban demographic shifts have produced growing numbers of minority students moving into predominantly White, well-funded, middle class suburban schools (Hill, 2009; Bancroft, 2009). Suburban principals face challenges associated with predominantly White faculties who lack awareness of minority cultural differences, resulting in deficit views regarding minority students' learning and behavior differences (Howard, 2007; Mabokela & Madsen, 2005; Chaney & De Gennaro, 2005). These challenges have been exacerbated by rapid

growth of English language learner populations in many suburban districts (Field, 2008; Howard, 2007).

In contrast, literature related to the rural principalship focuses on three challenges (Winn, et.al, 2009a): retention of effective principals (Partlow & Ridenor 2008; Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007; Arnold, Gaddy, & Dean, 2004); difficult community relations (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006; Mitchem, Kossar, & Ludlow 2006; Jimerson, 2005); and pressure to meet standards with limited resources (Warren & Peel, 2005; Arnold et.al., 2004). Thus, although urban, suburban, and rural school leaders face different obstacles, there is a pronounced need for effective, skilled leaders in each type of school.

Purpose

In spite of overwhelming evidence (Winn, et.al, 2009 a, 2009b) that principals have an essential role in creating effective schools (Marzano, et.al., 2005; Leithwood, et.al., 2004; Lesotte, 1992, 1991), comparisons of leadership skills in terms student academic achievement and type of school population (urban, suburban, or rural) have not been conducted. Because of urgency for developing highly skilled school leaders, this study compared the leadership skills of practicing urban, suburban, and rural administrators to determine to what degree their skills differed by campus student achievement.

Method

Data Source: Leadership Skill Assessment

Records collected in 2006-2008 from a Texas state-approved professional development performance assessment, Principal Assessment of Student Success (PASS), provided the data for this study. Using substantiation provided by principals (campus improvement plan, state accountability data, Adequate Yearly Progress, phone interview, teacher performance data, and

student performance data) PASS assessor teams (two assessors per principal; recruited among Texas veteran campus and central office administrators, and university educational leadership departments) rated principal leadership skills. Identified by Thompson (1993) and adopted by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA), skills within three domains (functional, programming, and interpersonal) provided context from which to assess principal leadership (see Appendix A).

Data Source: Campus Student Achievement

Finally, to identify the relationship between leadership skills and campus student achievement, assessor-identified NPBEA skills were compared within campus student achievement categories as measured by Texas (No Child Left Behind) public school accountability ratings (from low to high): Academically Acceptable (AA), Recognized (R) or Exemplary (E).

Participants

PASS data accessed from Texas principal evaluations conducted state-wide from 2006 through 2008 yielded records of 784 elementary, middle, and high school principals from 248 urban, 277 suburban, and 259 rural schools (see Appendix B). Unequal representation of schools at each instructional level (elementary, middle and high school) within each state accountability level (AA, R, E) may have affected interpretation of study findings; however, the dispersion of these data reflects the pattern of accountability ratings in Texas.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate principal and assessor rankings. Chi-square cross tabulation tables used to determine dependence/independence by school accountability ratings and principals' NPBEA skill rating frequency counts were not found to be statistically significant and, thus, were not reported.

Results

Comparison of NPBEA Skills by Campus Type and Campus Accountability Rating

Assessor ratings of the top five skills by campus accountability ratings produced 672 ratings for 244 urban principals (see Appendix C), 711 ratings for 277 suburban principals (see Appendix D), and 714 ratings for 259 rural principals (see Appendix E). The five most frequently rated skills by campus type (urban, suburban, or rural) and state accountability group (AA, R, E) are listed in Table 1. Of the 14 NCBEA skills assessed, five did not appear (*Problem Analysis, Curriculum Design, Measurement and Evaluation, and Resource Allocation*) among those most frequently observed.

Although different in order, principals of all campus types and state accountability groups demonstrated high ratings in skills of *Leadership* and *Sensitivity*. *Information Collection* was rated highly for all but urban R campus principals, and *Organizational Oversight* was common to all but urban E campus principals. *Student Guidance and Development* was rated highly at urban AA, R, E and rural E campuses, while *Judgment* was noted among urban R, suburban AA, rural R, and rural E leaders. Skills appearing in only two groups included *Instructional Management* (suburban E and rural AA) and *Oral Expression* (urban E and suburban R). A unique skill exhibited by only one campus group was *Staff Development* (rural E).

TABLE 1

Comparison of top five Urban, Suburban, and Rural Principal NPBEA Skills by Texas Campus Accountability Rating

Top 5 Ratings (5= Highest)	5	4	3	2	1
<i>Urban</i> (AA) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Information Collection (FD)	Organization Oversight (FD)	Stud/Guid (PD)

<i>Suburban</i> (AA) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Information Collection (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Judgment (PD)	Organization Oversight (FD)
<i>Rural</i> (AA) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Information Collection (FD)	Organization Oversight (FD)	Instructional Management (PD)
<i>Urban</i> (R) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Stud/Guid (PD)	Organization Oversight (FD)	Judgment (FD)
<i>Suburban</i> (R) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Information Collection (FD)	Organization Oversight (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Oral Expression (ID)
<i>Rural</i> (R) Campuses	Leadership (FD)	Information Collection (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Organization Oversight (FD)	Judgment (FD)
<i>Urban</i> (E) Campuses	Sensitivity (ID)	*Info/collect (FD) *Stud/Guid/ (PD) *Oral/Express (ID)	*Info/collect (FD) *Stud/Guid (PD) *Oral/Express (ID)	*Info/collect (FD) *Stud/Guid (PD) *Oral/Express (ID)	Leadership (FD)
<i>Suburban</i> (E) Campuses	Instructional Management (PD)	Leadership (FD)	Information Collection (FD)	Sensitivity (ID)	Organization Oversight (FD)
<i>Rural</i> (E) Campuses	Stud/Guid (PD)	Organization Oversight (FD)	*Staff Devel (PD) * Judgment (FD)	*Staff Devel (PD) * Judgment (FD)	*Leadership (FD) *Information Collection (FD) *Sensitivity (ID)

*same frequency counts; (AA) = Academically Acceptable, (R) = Recognized, (E)= Exemplary; FD = functional, PD = Programming, ID = Interpersonal Domains

Assessors consistently highly rated AA campus leaders on three functional domain skills (*Leadership, Sensitivity, Information Collection* and *Organizational Oversight*) and one interpersonal domain skill (*Sensitivity*) regardless of campus type (urban, suburban, rural). Only *Student Guidance and Development* (urban), *Judgment* (suburban) *Instructional Management* (rural) differed among AA campus leaders. Notably, these skills all fall within the programming

domain. Six of the 14 NPBEA skills were exhibited most frequently among AA campus leaders.

At R rated campuses, urban, suburban, and rural principals were rated the same in two functional domain skills (*Leadership, Organizational Oversight*) and one interpersonal domain skill (*Sensitivity*). *Information Collection*, a functional domain skill, was rated highly for all except urban campus principals, and *Judgment*, a programming domain skill, was common to all except suburban campus principals. Unique skills exhibited by only one R campus type were *Oral Expression* (suburban), an interpersonal domain skill, and *Student Guidance and Development* (urban), a programming domain skill. Seven of the 14 NPBEA skills were exhibited most frequently among R campus leaders.

Leaders from E rated campuses shared two functional domain skills (*Leadership, Information Collection*) and one interpersonal domain skill (*Sensitivity*). *Organizational Oversight*, a functional domain skill, was rated highly for all except urban campus principals, and *Student Guidance and Development*, a programming domain skill, was common to all except suburban campus principals. Unique skills exhibited by only one E campus type were *Oral Expression* (urban), an interpersonal domain skill, *Instructional Management* (suburban), a programming domain skill, and *Staff Development* and *Judgment* (rural), both programming domain skills. Nine of the 14 NPBEA skills were exhibited most frequently among E campus leaders.

Significant Conclusions

Comparisons of Overall Principal Skills

Of the 14 NPBEA skills assessed, only nine were consistently identified among the top skills of sampled Texas principals. Regardless of school type (urban, suburban, and rural) or campus achievement rating (AA, R, E), sampled principals were rated highest in the same four of

the 14 NPBEA skills assessed (*Leadership, Sensitivity, Information Collection, and Organizational Oversight*). This indicates the importance of these skills in school leadership. However, the absence of *Problem Analysis, Curriculum Design, Measurement and Evaluation, and Resource Allocation* also has strong implications. Four of the five are programming domain skills requiring systemic campus leadership and holistic perspective, enabling principals to develop frameworks, design anticipated outcomes, implement supervision, set goals, and utilize inferential thinking. Due to the complexity of these concerns, it is possible assessors found these skills more difficult to quantify.

Comparisons of Principal Skills within Student Achievement Groups

Leaders at campuses with highest student achievement exhibited a greater number of skills (e.g. AA - six, R - seven, and E – nine); indicating a possible relationship between campus student achievement and number of leadership skills exhibited by campus principal. Principals at AA and R campuses exhibited three common functional skills (*Leadership, Information Collection, and Organizational Oversight*) and one common interpersonal skill (*Sensitivity*). In contrast, E campus principals exhibited two functional domain skills (*Organizational Oversight and Judgment*), both of which require the use of perspective rather than managerial skill, and three programming domain skills (*Student Guidance and Development, Instructional Management, and Staff Development*) which require utilizing resources, prioritizing, and drawing informed conclusions to make quality decisions. These findings support Anagnostopoulus and Rutlege (2007) contention that student achievement increases when leadership is collaborative rather than managerial.

Comparisons of Principal Skills within Campus Types (Urban, Suburban, Rural)

Unique top rated skills among urban principals by campus student achievement were

Student Guidance and Development (AA), *Judgment* (R), and *Oral Expression* (E). These differences may reflect inherent challenges at each accountability level. AA principals, faced with greater numbers of low performing students, may focus more intently on critical student learning needs (*Student Guidance and Development*, programming domain) to avoid sanctions associated with low test scores (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007). R campus principals may focus less on sanctions and, instead rely upon *Judgment* for collaborative decision making to prioritize significant campus issues affecting overall student performance. Interpersonal domain skills like *Oral Expression* improve effectiveness of functional and programming skills; thus E principals, who are less threatened by poor student performance, may require skills with more precision to improve already successful programs. Large, complex student populations (Nevarez & Wood, 2007; Laird et.al, 2007) and inexperienced teachers (Humphrey et.al., 2005; Cortney & Coble, 2005; Tillman, 2003) may require the most successful urban leaders to develop greater communication skills, thus differentiating campus achievement.

Suburban principals shared four skills, but varied according to campus rating in the fifth skill: *Judgment* (AA), *Oral Expression* (R), and *Instructional Management* (E). Again, challenges faced by campuses may account for differences. Perhaps suburban principals at AA campuses exhibited *Judgment* (functional domain) to address myriad of challenges associated with student demographics changes (Field, 2008; Howard, 2007; Mabokela & Madsen, 2005). Likewise, altering instruction to meet diverse learning needs may explain why suburban principals at E schools were rated highest in *Instructional Management*. Furthermore, campus success might favor leaders with communication expertise, differentiating AA to R campus leaders.

Top rated skills of rural principals differed by: *Instructional Management* (AA),

Judgment (R and E), and *Staff Development* and *Student Guidance and Development* (E). It appears that E campus principals were more willing to risk capitalizing on their unique leadership strengths, whereas their AA and R campus counterparts approached leadership with greater conformity to traditional models. Furthermore, rural principals who demonstrated programming domain skills (i.e. *Staff Development* and *Student Guidance and Development*) provided systemic, collaborative leadership that may result in improved achievement in comparison to counterparts at lower performing campuses who demonstrated functional domain (managerial skills) supported by interpersonal skills (Baxter, 2008; Daresh, 2007). Rural E campus principals were the only group to exhibit *Staff Development* among the top five skills. Due to limited resources associated with rural campuses (Warren & Peel, 2005; Arnold et.al., 2004), effective faculty training may differentiate rural campus student achievement levels.

Comparisons of Principal Skills among All Campus/ Achievement types

Differentiated by only two skills per campus type (urban, rural, suburban), leaders at AA rated schools were more likely to exhibit similar skills than their counterparts at R or E rated campuses. Among leaders from R rated campuses, suburban/rural leaders were most alike, differing by only two skills; whereas, urban/rural leaders differed by three skills, while urban/suburban leaders differed by four skills. The greatest differences in leadership skills were exhibited among E campus leaders. Three skills differentiated E leaders in urban/suburban and urban/rural comparisons, while four skills differentiated E leaders in suburban/rural comparisons. Overall, AA campus leaders were most similar regardless of campus type, supporting studies indicating when schools face sanctions, principals utilize management versus systemic leadership strategies (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007).

The largest differences among leadership groups were found between suburban/rural E

campus leaders. These differences may result from differences in suburban/rural financial resources (Hill, 2009; Warren & Peel, 2005) and suburban demographic changes more comparable to urban, rather than rural, schools (Howard, 2007; Nevarez & Wood, 2007).

Recommendations

As noted, quality school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in influencing student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Study findings indicate that principals from all campus achievement levels demonstrate functional domain (managerial) skills; however, as principals increasingly demonstrate programming domain (systemic) skills, campus student achievement increases. This finding suggests the need for professional development aimed at nurturing systemic practices among campus leaders. In addition, clear communication, both individually (i.e. *Oral Expression*) and within groups (i.e. *Staff Development*) appears to differentiate leaders at more highly rated campuses, indicating a need to develop these skills to a greater extent.

Future study examining principal attributes (i.e. gender, pre-administrative educational experience, leadership experience) that influence principals' skills might further clarify differences among leaders from schools with different student achievement levels. Furthermore, differentiation of principals' skills by campus level of instruction (i.e. elementary or secondary) might identify skills unique to student instructional level.

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Appendix A

National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA):

Knowledge and Skill Domains

Functional Domain Skills comprise base-level management and organizational structure to supervise daily, routine campus business (e.g. to run the buses on time, schedule classes, or maintain order). Evidence of effectiveness is typically quantifiably measurable (e.g. attendance records, disciplinary referrals).

1. Leadership: Providing purpose and direction, formulating goals with staff and setting priorities based on community and district priorities and student and staff needs.
2. Information Collection: Classifying and organization information for use in decision making and mentoring.
3. Problem Analysis: Identifying problems, identifying possible causes, seeking additional needed information, framing possible solutions.
4. Judgment: Giving priority to significant issues then reaching logical conclusions and making quality decisions.
5. Organizational Oversight: Planning and scheduling own and other's work so that resources are used appropriately and monitoring priorities so that goals and deadlines are met.

Programming Domain Skills provide systemic campus leadership requiring a holistic perspective that incorporates but surpass functional domain skills. More complex and difficult to quantify, these skills enable principals to develop frameworks, design anticipated outcomes, implement ongoing supervision, set goals, and draw inferences.

6. Instructional Management: Ensuring appropriate instructional methods are used to create positive learning experiences.
7. Curriculum Design: With staff, planning and implementing a framework for instruction and aligning curriculum with anticipated outcomes.
8. Student Guidance and Development: Enlisting the support and cooperation of diverse professionals, citizens, community agencies, parents and students to promote the growth and development of all students.
9. Staff Development: Supervising individuals and groups and providing feedback on performance and initiating self-development.
10. Measurement and Evaluation: Examining the extent to which outcomes meet or exceed previously defined goals, or priorities and drawing inferences for program revisions.
11. Resource Allocation: Allocating, monitoring and evaluating fiscal, human, material and time resources to reach campus goals and objectives.

Interpersonal Domain Skills employ functional and programming domain skills, but are subject to individual perception, making measurement more difficult. For example, principals may perceive themselves to be sensitive while faculty members disagree. Nevertheless, these skills improve effective implementation of both functional and programming skills.

12. Sensitivity: Perceiving and responding to the needs and concerns of others.
13. Oral and Nonverbal Expression: Making oral presentations that are clear and easy to understand.
14. Written Expression: Expressing ideas and appropriately in writing for different audiences. (Thomson, 1993).

Appendix B**Sample**

Urban Principals by Texas Accountability Ratings and School Type; Frequency count and percentage (N=248)

Urban Campus Type	AA Count %	Of Total AA %	R Count %	Of Total R %	E Count %	Of Total E %	Total Table Count	Total Table %
Elementary	68 39.3%	27.4	48 76.2%	19.4	12 100%	4.8	128	51.6
Middle School	39 22.5%	15.7	11 17.5%	4.4	0 0%	0	50	20.2
High School	66 38.2%	26.6	4 6.3%	1.6	0 0%	0	70	28.2
Total	173 100%	69.8	63 100%	25.4	12 100%	4.8	248	100

(Lowest to Highest: AA = Academically Acceptable, R = Recognized, E = Exemplary)

Suburban Principals by Texas Accountability Ratings and School Type; Frequency count and percentage (N=277)

Suburban Campus Type	AA Count %	Of Total AA %	R Count %	Of Total R %	E Count %	Of Total E %	Total Table Count	Total Table %
Elementary	43 31%	16	63 61%	23	31 94%	11	137	49.5
Middle School	39 28%	14	27 26%	10	2 6%)	1	68	24.5
High School	58 41%	21	14 13%	5	0 0%)	0	72	26.0
Total	140 100%	51	104 100%	38	33 100%	12	277	100

(Lowest to Highest: AA = Academically Acceptable, R = Recognized, E = Exemplary)

Rural Principals by Texas Accountability Ratings and School Type; Frequency count and percentage (N=259)

Rural Campus Type	AA Count %	Of Total AA %	R Count %	Of Total R %	E Count %	Of Total E %	Total Table Count	Total Table %
Elementary	27 18.9%	10.4	62 64.6%	23.9	19 95.0%	7.3	108	41.7
Middle School	40 28.0%	15.4	23 24.0%	8.9	0 0.0%	0	63	24.3
High School	76 53.1%	29.3	11 11.5%	4.2	1 5%	0.4	88	34.0
Total	143 100%	55.2	96 100%	37.1	20 100%	7.7	259	100

Appendix C

Urban Principal NPBEA Skills by Texas Accountability Ratings (N= 244 teams)

Functional Domain Skills *322/672 (47.9%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Leadership	86	28	3	117
Information Collection	51	13	4	68
Problem Analysis	15	8	2	25
Judgment	29	14	2	45
Organizational Oversight	50	16	1	67
Programing Domain Skills *197/672 (29.3%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Instructional Management	32	11	1	44
Curriculum Design	17	10	1	28
Student Guidance & Development	49	17	4	70
Staff Development	11	3	0	14
Measurement & Evaluation	19	6	2	27
Resource Allocation	11	3	0	14
Interpersonal Domain Skills *153/672 (22.8%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Sensitivity	67	26	7	97
Oral & Non-verbal Expression	29	12	4	45
Written Expression	8	2	1	11

Note. *= Total by Domain; AA=Academically Acceptable, R=Recognized, E = Exemplary.

Appendix D

Suburban Principal NPBEA Skills by Texas Accountability Ratings (N= 264 teams)

Functional Domain Skills *440/711 (61.9%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Leadership	70	64	11	142
Information Collection	49	37	11	97
Problem Analysis	18	16	6	40
Judgment	39	21	4	64
Organizational Oversight	33	35	9	77
Programming Domain Skills *147/711 (20.6%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Instructional Management	29	20	14	63
Curriculum Design	9	2	4	15
Student Guidance & Development	16	6	4	15
Staff Development	4	4	1	9
Measurement & Evaluation	15	7	1	23
Resource Allocation	7	4	0	11
Interpersonal Domain Skills *144/711 (20.2%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Sensitivity	42	34	10	86
Oral & Non-verbal Expression	23	22	7	52
Written Expression	3	2	1	6

Note. *= Total by Domain; AA=Academically Acceptable, R=Recognized, E = Exemplary.

Appendix E

Rural Principal NPBEA Skills by Texas Accountability Ratings (N= 259 teams)

Functional Domain Skills *365/714 (51%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Leadership	71	59	7	137
Information Collection	45	39	7	56
Problem Analysis	16	12	5	33
Judgment	26	28	8	62
Organizational Oversight	37	29	11	77
Programming Domain Skills *204/714 (28.5%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Instructional Management	34	20	3	57
Curriculum Design	27	2	0	29
Student Guidance & Development	27	14	15	56
Staff Development	13	6	8	27
Measurement & Evaluation	18	4	0	22
Resource Allocation	7	3	3	13
Interpersonal Domain Skills *145/714 (20.3%)	AA	R	E	TOTAL RATINGS
Sensitivity	48	36	7	91
Oral & Non-verbal Expression	20	15	2	37
Written Expression	8	6	3	17

Note. *= Total by Domain; AA=Academically Acceptable, R=Recognized, E = Exemplary.