

THE PRACTITIONER: HOW SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS LEAD AND INFLUENCE*

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Abstract

In 2004 the Missouri Professors of Educational Administration (MPEA) identified principals who had guided their schools to improved student achievement and/or maintained high levels of achievement.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Introduction

In 2004 the Missouri Professors of Educational Administration (MPEA) identified principals who had guided their schools to improved student achievement and/or maintained high levels of achievement. Principals were identified from rural, suburban and urban high schools, middle schools and elementary schools. In the spring of 2004 the identified principals were brought together for a KIVA session at the annual spring MPEA meeting. In the spring of 2005 surveys were sent to the faculties of the identified principals and on-site interviews were conducted to address how the principal addressed the areas of vision, culture/climate, management, public relations, ethics, and political/social issues in their school. Principals were also asked what aspects of their preparation program were of greatest benefit in these areas. In an effort to gather data from a larger population of successful principals in the state of Missouri, the MPEA commissioned a third year for the backward mapping project in 2006, to include a broader sample of successful principals.

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Principals were selected based on minimum years experience in their current school, increase in student performance on the state's achievement test, and/or maintaining a high level of student performance on the state's achievement test. Candidates were also selected based on the size and grade configuration of the school, location, rural, suburban or urban. Gender and ethnicity were also considered in the selection of successful principals. Interviews were conducted in the school setting to obtain data on how the successful principal leads the school in the development of a vision, creating a positive school culture, promoting a safe learning environment, collaboration with the community, ensures ethical behavior, and responds to the political, social, economic legal and cultural influences of the school. The research conducted is designed to impact educational administration preparation programs in the areas of curriculum and instruction.

Literature Review

1 Themes of Effective Leadership

The ISLLC standards adopted in 1996 sought to reform or redefine administration through the establishment of standards for those who seek to be licensed as a school administrator. Examples of this are embedded within the standards. The involvement of the community in the development of a shared vision of learning is in ISLLC standard 1. Standard 2 focuses on developing and sustaining a positive school culture. Standard 3 speaks to the management of the school and the effective use of resources. The importance of families as partners in the education of children is addressed in ISLLC standard 4, and standard 5 focuses on the necessity of acting in an ethical manner. Finally, ISLLC standard 6 speaks to the development of lines of communication between the school and decision makers outside of the local school community.

Hoyle, English, and Steffy (1998) addressed skills for successful school leaders. In the book *Skills for Successful 21st Century Leaders* (1998), skills needed for success were identified as visionary leadership, policy and governance, communication and community relations, organizational management, curriculum planning and development, instructional management, staff evaluation, using research and data, and the ethics of leadership (Hoyle et al., 1998).

The Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) (2001), give some specific responsibilities for effectively leading today's school. Among these responsibilities are setting high expectations for faculty and all students, creating a caring school environment, in-service for teachers in the understanding of different learning styles, communication, using scarce resources in an efficient manner, engaging parents, community and businesses as well as defining the roles for each, and using data to improve the teaching and learning process (Southern Regional Educational Board, [SREB], 2001).

2 Effective Principals

Effective principals are good communicators. The ability to communicate effectively will help support successful programs in any building (Cruz, 1995). Communication encompasses more than speaking. It is written and oral communication as well as communicating with behavior and not just words. A study conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found that effective principals establish strong lines of two-way communication throughout the school community. It is important for the principal to ask questions, tell the truth, and encourage feedback from members of the school community (Bolman & Deal, 2002). The principal interacts with students, staff and parents on a regular basis. Research by McEwan (2003) found that successful principals are communicating one hundred percent of the time- by listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Often the principal will use written communication to parents, students and staff. The importance of correct grammar and spelling in written communication is a must (Holman, 1997). Effective principals seek out opportunities that actively engage the community in the school (Beck & Murphy, 1996).

Effective principals are visionary. In his study McEwan (2003) found that while less effective principals offer excuses, highly effective principals envision a successful school that has achieved its mission. They are able to focus on the possibility of a high-achieving school, and help their school community buy into that vision. Effective principals understand that while they help create the school's vision, they must also cultivate an environment that allows teachers to make decisions that result in ownership in the vision (Beck

& Murphy, 1996). Effective leaders synthesize and assemble a vision with input from all stakeholders (Fullan, 1997). Studies by Marzano et al. (2005) found that effective principals establish clear goals and help the school continually work toward achieving these goals.

Effective principals are ethical. They treat all people with respect all the time (Whitaker, 2003). Effective principals believe honesty is always the best policy, and understand they must demonstrate ethical behavior on a daily basis (McEwan, 2003). The effective principal does the right thing, keeping in mind that the student's welfare is the bottom line (McEwan). At the same time, they must be able to consider what is best for the school in order to make the right decision (Whitaker, 2003). While this can be a difficult task, the effective principal is able to sort out conflicting values (Bolman & Deal, 2002).

Effective principals use data for school improvement. According to Marzano et al. (2005) effective principals continuously monitor the impact of school programs on student learning, and use this information to inform future practice. They are results oriented, and realize that translating high expectations to academic achievement will benefit their students with greater opportunities in the future (McEwan, 2003). Effective principals know how to collect the data, but more importantly, know how to analyze it and use it in meaningful ways (McEwan, 2003). They are always searching for meaningful data, and are able to critically analyze the gathered information (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). To this end, they understand the limitations of individual pieces of data, and are capable of aggregating data to make informed decisions. As critical consumers of information, they pay attention to research when making decisions, and use it to evaluate possible school improvement options (McEwan, 2003).

Effective principals build relationships. As McEwan (2003) states, "Relationships drive school improvement" (p. 54). Effective principals understand that to have a successful school, they need to focus on the people within a school, not the programs (Whitaker, 2003). The ability to establish personal relationships with all members of a school community is central to the work of an effective principal. These relationships convey a sense of caring and appreciation (McEwan, 2003). Sandra Harris (2004) sees caring as a way of showing respect for teachers and students and believes this process involves challenging people to grow personally and professionally. R.J. Marzano et al. (2005) found that effective principals demonstrate a variety of relationship-building behaviors with teachers, students, and parents. Effective principals engage in these behaviors on a daily basis in an effort to keep their relationships positive and growing (Whitaker, 2003). This constant attention to relationships allows the effective principal to build up emotional bank accounts. They know how to bring out the best in those around them, and foster relationships that empower people and help them thrive (McEwan, 2003).

Effective principals impact the school culture. The leadership provided by a principal directly affects the climate and culture of a school, which in turn affect student achievement (Sergiovanni, 2001). Effective principals pay attention to the culture of the school and focus on creating a collaborative work environment (Fullan, 1997). Studies by Marzano et al. (2005) found effective principals fostered shared beliefs and a collegial sense of community within the school that ultimately impacts student achievement. In order to impact the school culture, effective principals must be able to envision a successful school, act with integrity, and communicate this vision through relationships with the school community (McEwan, 2003). Principals who are effective work to create a positive environment, and believe it is their responsibility to do so (Whitaker, 2003). They understand that local citizens want a school that reflects their values, and work to shape a positive culture (Sergiovanni, 2001).

Effective principals understand what good teaching is. Findings of Marzano et al. (2005) reinforces the belief that effective principals are knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, and involved in design and implementation. According to McEwan (2003) effective principals are knowledgeable about teaching and learning, and serve as instructional leaders within their buildings. They believe it is critical to be up to date on best practices in instruction and assessment, and seek out opportunities to learn more about good teaching (Beck & Murphy, 1996). Not only do effective principals understand what good teaching is, they also recognize that their primary goal is to improve the effectiveness of their teachers (Whitaker, 2003). They are able to tell the difference between activity and achievement, and can help teachers improve their practice by providing and championing professional development to benefit student learning (McEwan).

Design and Methodology

Participants selected to participate in the study full-time building level administrators in the state of Missouri. The building level administrators were selected based on test score data obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as it related to the identification of high performing schools. Every effort was made to include a cross section of schools based on location, rural, suburban, and urban, grade configuration and size of the school. A purposive sample of principals was developed to include gender and ethnic balance whenever possible. Twenty-seven principals were selected based on the criteria. Of the 27 selected seventeen participated in the study. Of these 65 percent were male and 35 percent were female.

Prior to conducting the face-to-face interviews each principal was contacted by phone to schedule a time that would best meet their needs. Questions and release forms were sent via email to each principal before the face-to-face interview. Release forms were collected before any interview was conducted. Members of the Missouri Professors of Educational Administration (MPEA) volunteered to conduct the interviews. The interview consisted of 18 open ended questions asking the participants to respond to how they lead their school, engage their staff, as well as courses and/or activities in their preparation program that prepared them for the task of being a successful principal. The areas covered were vision, culture, management, collaboration, ethics and political, social, economic and legal aspects of the school. Participants also were asked to describe the state of their current school when they first arrived, changes they implemented, and lastly the most important responsibilities of the principal and the greatest obstacles faced as an administrator.

Results

The results of the data collected are presented in tables noting the key responses of the participants and when appropriate themes from the responses.

Table 1.

How do you lead your school in the development of a common vision?

Key Responses

Continuous conversations	Communication	Modeling
Communication	Teacher Empowerment	Cheerleading
Communication	Find the right people	Listen/Speak
Lead by example	Focus on Achievement	Consistency
High expectations	Communication	Collaboration
Keeping the vision up front		

Theme: Communication

Table 2.

What activities do you engage your staff in to develop a common vision?

Key Responses

Regular meetings	Develop relationships	Professional development
Data	Committees	Discussion
Culture supports vision	Share the vision	Site council
Listen	Develop common language	Cadres
Professional development	High expectations	Communication
High expectations	Use data	Meetings/Retreats
Professional development		

Theme(s): High Expectations, Professional Development, Use of Data

Table 3.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided in the development of a common vision.

Key Responses

Analysis of culture	Dealing with difficult people	Discussion
Evaluation of data	In basket activities	Scenarios
Curriculum class	Leadership Academy	Relating to people
Conversations	Engagement in practice	Action research
Accelerated schools	Team learning	Change process
Collaborative learning		

Table 4.

How do you lead your school in creating a positive school culture?

Key Responses

Create a safe environment	Supporting the staff	Modeling
Culture surveys	Teaming	Empowerment
Shared ownership	PLC	Clear expectations
Feedback	Shared ownership	Positive attitude
Celebrate success	Save environment	Be positive
Lead by example	Collaboration	Listen
Celebrate success	Listen	Understand expectations

Theme: Collaboration/shared ownership

Table 5.

What activities do you engage your staff in to create a positive school culture?

Key Responses

Conversation	Friday notes	Be successful
Teams	Climate & Culture Team	Study groups
Anti-bullying program	Relations	Recognition
Be visible	Steering committee	Team-
building		
Recognition	Shared decision making	

Theme: Committees and Teams

Table 6.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided in the development of a positive school culture.

Key Responses

Leadership Academy	Volunteer Program	Communication
Very little	On the job training	Cohort
Learning from others	Learned on my own	
Organizational leadership		

Table 7.

How do you lead your school in promoting a safe learning environment?

Key Responses

Establish Procedures	Communicate	Setting expectations
Safe environment	Clear expectations	High expectations
Checklist focusing on safety	Respectful environment	Communication
Communication	Know the community	Know your school
Use the counselor	Be visible	Follow through
Create positive climate	Zero tolerance	Good facilities
No tolerance		

Themes(s): Clear expectations, Zero tolerance, Communication

Table 8.

What activities do you engage your staff in to develop a safe learning environment?

Key Responses

Keeping people informed	Harassment training	Safety committee
Bullying training	Talk	Workshops
Character education	Communicate	Training for staff
Behavior management workshop	Enforce discipline policy	Communicate

Theme: Communicate

Table 9.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided in the promotion of a safe learning environment.

Key Responses

School Law	Keeping good records	Facilities
Building and Finance	School Law	
Networking		
Special Education	School Law	

Theme: School Law

Table 10.

How do you lead your school to collaborate with others and respond to diverse community needs?

Key Responses

Developed African American Achievement Program	Business partners
Develop relations	Respect
Inspire students	Know the community
Neighborhood visits	Multi-cultural programs
Mentors for students	Parent organizations
Professional development	Networks
	Ruby Payne book study
	Tutors
	Parent meetings
	Listen
	Listen

Theme(s): Make connections, Know your community, Network

Table 11.

What activities do you engage your staff in to collaborate with others and respond to diverse community needs?

Key Responses

Close the achievement gap	Engage in diversity	Character Plus
Expect participation	Be role models	Feedback
Students understanding the community		Collaboration

Table 12.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided in responding to diverse community needs.

Key Responses

Nothing	Weak spot	No course
Collaborative activities	Multicultural classes	Strategic planning
Discussion	Communication with leaders	
No specific class	Communication with media	

Table 13.

How do you lead your school in an ethical manner?

Key Responses

Model	Modeling	High expectations
Example	Model	Kids first
Example	Modeling	Kids first
Learning with students	Example	Example
High academic integrity	Daily contacts	Example
Give back to the community	Promote character	

Theme: Modeling by example

Table 14.

What activities do you engage your staff in to ensure ethical behavior?

Key Responses

IDEA	Know the policy	Teachable moment
Professionalism	Decisions based on beliefs	High expectations
Communication	Confidentiality training	Hire good people
Don't embarrass the school	Rules ensure productivity	

Table 15.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided you in leading a school in an ethical manner.

Key Responses

Ethics class	Code of ethics	Role playing
Not enough taught	School Law	School Law
School Law	Tactics of effective leaders	Leadership Academy
Accelerated schools		

Theme(s): School Law, Ethics

Table 16.

How do you respond to political, social, economic, legal and cultural influences?

Key Responses

Maintain connections	Involved in the community	Keep kids first
Legislative updates	Principal meetings	Recognize issues
Proactive with parents	Be part of the community	Understand community
Invite them in	Negotiate	Fair and consistent

Theme: Be part of the community

Table 17.

What activities do you engage your staff in regarding political, social, economic, legal and cultural influences?

Key Responses

Keep them involved	Share information	Remind them
Encourage to be active	Contact officials	Follow policy
Establish schedules	Discussions	High expectations
Parental involvement	Let people know	Communicate
Keep them informed		

Theme(s): Keep people informed, share information

Table 18.

Classes or activities in preparation program that aided in responding to political, social, economic, legal and cultural influences.

Key Responses

School and Community Relations	Business and Finance	School Law
Politics	School Law	Finance
School District Administration	School Law	

Theme: School Law

Table 19.

What changes have you implemented?

Key Responses

Created structure	Set high expectations	Curriculum changes
Multi-cultural experiences	Increased technology	Empowered staff
Reduced staff	Learning communities	Thoughtful learning
New reading program	Developed committees	Increased class size
Meet the needs of kids	Used data	Collaboration
Let teachers know where they stand	Input from faculty	Build trust
Communication	Walk-through evaluations	High expectations
Rigorous curriculum	Character education	

Table 19.

What changes have you implemented?

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Communication	Walk-through evaluations	High expectations
Rigorous curriculum	Character education	

Table 20.

Top five most important things you do as a principal

Top Five Responses

Safe Environment/Discipline	(17)
Communication/Developing Relations	(14)
Curriculum/Instruction/Evaluation	(10)
Be Visible	(7)
Set Vision/High Expectations	(6)

Other Responses – Facilities, Hiring Good People, Modeling, Knowing the Community

Table 21.

What are the greatest obstacles you face as a school administrator?

Top Four Responses

Time	(10)
Finance	(6)
People Without Vision/Difficult People	(6)
External Demands—Central Office, Test Scores, NCLB, Accountability	(6)

Other Responses – Discipline, Dealing with Special Needs Students/Parents, Relationship with Family, Curriculum, Resources, Scheduling, Politics, Professional Development

Conclusions

The data collected indicates that successful principals must communicate with their publics, involve people and set high expectations for students and staff and lead by example. The findings support the literature in that effective principals are good communicators, visionary, ethical, use data, build relationships, and impact the school culture. Effective communications or being a good communicator is embedded in several aspects, according to the principals in this study, and would seem to be essential in the preparation of future leaders and should be examined to ensure the knowledge, disposition and performance of effective communication is included, articulated and developed as part of the preparation program.

Successful principals indicated they follow-through on the need for good communication when working with their staff. Responses such as building relationships, communication and teaming were noted when asked to respond to how the staff is engaged.

Successful principals also indicated the importance of communication in the preparation programs whether it is through collaborative learning or communication with other school publics. The need for a strong school law class was also evident in the responses of the participants. Additionally the participants indicated a gap in the preparation programs with regard to responding to the diverse needs of the community and to some

extent in the area of ethical leadership.

Future Actions

The Missouri Professors of Educational Administration (MPEA) reviewed the data during the Spring MPEA 2006 Conference at Lincoln University. The 17 educational administration degree granting institutions will reconvene for the Fall MPEA 2006 Conference to evaluate current program delivery methods, curriculum and instruction utilizing the responses from the identified successful principals. The purpose of the discussion will be to identify strengths and areas for improvement and share ideas to meet the needs of future school leaders in Missouri. The principals that participated in the research will be invited to participate in the discussion and offer suggestions for program improvement based on their experience and from the perspective of successful practicing administrators. With approved funding from the Missouri Leadership Academy and the State Action for Educational Leadership Programs, MPEA will expand the number of participants and continue to collect data from successful practicing administrators in an effort to continuously improve educational leadership programs across the state of Missouri.

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Backward Mapping Project Participates

Principals

Don Andrews – Summit Lakes Middle School

Mickey Bowers – Centerville Elementary

Brenda Campbell – Richland High School

Donnie Campbell – Green City High School

Pam Conway – Mill Creek Elementary

Stan Coulson – West Platte High School

Steve Coulson – Atlanta Elementary

Brent Depee – Warsaw High School

Kennie Jo Deshon – Field Elementary

Randall Dougherty – Skyline High School

James Helmig – Hardin Central Elementary

Everett Isaacs – Central High School
Mary Narvaez – Conway Elementary
Joe Powers – Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Michael Reik – Barry School
Chereyl Spann – Peabody Elementary
John Utne – Walt Disney Elementary
Missouri Professors of Educational Administration
Michael “Mick” Arnold
Dan Deschamp
Larry Ewing
Virgil Freeman
Max Fridell
Sandy Hutchinson
Jim Kern
Gerald Moseman
Robert Perry
Scotty Scott
Teresa VanDover
Bob Watson