# Principals' Supervision and Evaluation Cycles: Perspectives from Principals

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

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*The goals for this quantitative study were to examine principals' perceptions regarding supervision and evaluation within their own evaluations. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own supervision?; (2) What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own evaluation?; and (3) What are the perceptions of novice and experienced principals' regarding formative supervision? This study followed a descriptive format and used a 20 item on-line survey to measure principals' perceptions. Participants solicited included 275 principals in a Mountain West state. Overall, principals were in agreement with 19 out of 20 statements describing their own supervision and evaluation, and principals with three or less years of experience believed superintendents used classroom walk-throughs as a way to monitor classroom instruction more than experienced principals. In addition, principals with three or less years of experience viewed the feedback in their evaluations as more valuable than experienced principals.*

The leadership of principals is aligned with gains in student performance (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) and is second only to classroom instruction as a significant factor influencing student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004). Clearly, the leadership of principals is critical in creating and maintaining effective schools. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, stated he has "yet to see a great school without a great principal" (Superville, 2014, p. 10). Strong leadership from the principal is essential when maintaining a trusting climate and culture supporting effective teaching and student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Whalstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Despite the emphasis on the importance of principals to the functioning of successful schools, past principal evaluation models have been overlooked as important and many appear superficial (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985; Stronge, 2013), often leading to ambiguity regarding performance expectations and standards (Reeves, 2008).

Similar to teachers, principals require accurate feedback from evaluation systems to meet district expectations and student improvement goals (Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Elliot, & Carson, 2009; Range, Young, & Hvidston, 2012). However, researchers have long critiqued the variety of state and district principal evaluation systems, the haphazard manner by which evaluation systems are implemented, and the inconsistency of evaluation systems (Davis & Hensley, 1999; Ginsberg & Berry, 1990; Harrison & Peterson, 1988; Reeves, 2008). In an analysis of 68 scholarly and descriptive publications considering principal evaluation, Sanders and Kearney (2011) found practices by principal evaluators lack any consistency for both schools and districts with only 20 primary source publications in peer reviewed journals from 1980 – 2010 (Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011). This number of peer-reviewed publications provides additional evidence of the scarcity of research regarding the supervision and evaluation of principals.

In sum, a better understanding of how principals perceive the effectiveness of a principal supervision and evaluation system might ultimately improve the performance of principals and possibly increase student achievement. Practicing superintendents could benefit from principals' perspectives regarding their own supervision and evaluation as superintendents consider current instructional leadership practices. In addition, university administrator preparation programs would also benefit from research regarding the effectiveness of principal supervision and evaluation when planning instruction for prospective superintendents or principal evaluators.

## Principal Evaluation Systems

In most states, the evaluation of principals is driven by state statutes and supported by district policies. To support these mandates, many states have either created principal evaluation systems or tools to evaluate principals. One of the major factors in the creation of principal performance evaluation systems is a federal requirement for principal evaluation as included in the School Improvement Grants (SIG) for turnaround schools (USDoE, 2014), Race to the Top (RTTT) (USDoE, 2009), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). The critical element in all these initiatives is the improvement in the performance of the principals as evidenced by student growth. Thirty-four states have adopted new principal evaluation systems following the authorization of RTTT in 2009 (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012). More recently, Anderson and Turnbull (2016), described districts' developing evaluation support systems for novice principals. Specifically, improving the academic performance of the students as principals

engage in instructional leadership, and thus improving the teaching capabilities of the schools' teachers, is a focal point for principal evaluation systems.

The National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) support the involvement of principals as critical partners in the creation of principal evaluation systems (Clifford & Ross, 2011). In contrast, Clifford, Berhrstock-Sharratt, & Fetters (2012) describe the current reality for the involvement of principals as, "[their] voices, at times have been lost in efforts to create better performance evaluation systems" (p. 1). For the first time, the United States Department of Education (USDoE) is supporting school improvement initiatives and professional development for principals based on the research detailing the importance of the principal in successful schools. In the past, principal involvement in these initiatives had often been disregarded and cursory (Superville, 2014).

Typically, the superintendent is tasked with the responsibility for supervising and evaluating principals. In larger districts, the superintendent delegates these responsibilities to assistant superintendents or to district instructional leaders (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013). Murphy, Hallinger, and Peterson (1985), in a study of districts with excellent student achievement scores, found superintendents were actively involved in the supervision and evaluation of principals. These superintendents or principal evaluators also need to be trained and provided with support to effectively supervise and evaluate principals (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012).

There is variability in how states approach the creation and implementation of a principal evaluation system as evidenced by South Carolina, Delaware, North Carolina, and New Mexico with a mandated system for all school districts, and Iowa who requires districts to align the local district system with the state system of standards (Amsterdam, Johnson, Monrad, & Tonnsen, 2003; Mattson, Sanders, & Kearney, 2011). Regardless of the state creating a principal performance evaluation system with the same requirements for all principals or system supported by local control where the district decides the principal evaluation system (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012), these systems include two perspectives: 1) practice involving principal's leadership and effectiveness, and 2) impact defined by the growth of student outcomes (Clifford, Berhrstock-Sharratt & Fetters, 2012). Davis and Hensley (1999) describe the principal evaluation process as varying from district to district, with political agenda as opposed to a profession system of performance improvement.

In 2006, 46 states adopted or modified the Interstate School Leadership Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Canole & Young, 2013), and 43 of these states use some form of the ISLLC standards to license principals (Derrington & Sharrat, 2008). It is less clear regarding how many states or districts are using standards in their evaluation systems, and as seen in Washington state, only 45% of the superintendents were "familiar" with the ISLLC standards (Derrington & Sharrat, 2008). In Virginia, on the other hand, Catano and Stronge (2006) found a strong alignment between ISLLC standards and leadership in their review of 100 evaluation instruments.

The reliability of principal evaluation is even less clear. Condon and Clifford (2009) found only eight valid and reliable principal performance instruments out of 20 instruments. Goldring and colleagues (2008) analyzed 65 instruments used by urban districts and states and reported that most of the instruments were not aligned with the effective leadership research supporting the improvement of student learning. Although the evaluation of principals appears to be a critical factor for states and school districts, one study found the process of evaluation does

not support a connection between evaluation and student achievement (McMahon, Peters, & Schumaker, 2014). Thus, there is a need to further understand the impact of principal evaluation systems.

## Principal Supervision and Evaluation Cycle

Principal supervision parallels teacher supervision as more formative with observations, feedback, and opportunities for professional development as well as a cycle of continuous improvement, "more a process, not an event" (Oksana, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012, p. 224). In contrast, principal evaluation is a summative process occurring at the end of the year and is used for employment decisions such as reemployment and termination (Portin, Feldman, & Knapp, 2006). Supervision of principals is described by frequent random and planned visits to schools, meeting with principals between three and six times a year, generally using an oral process (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985). Conversely, the evaluation process is more formal with a "beginning of the year conference to select objectives and set specific performance indicators or criteria", mid-year review meetings and an end of the year written evaluation (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985, p. 81). Several models detailed steps for supervision and evaluation of principals, including a positive supervisory relationship built on trust, the determination of desired competencies, a multi-dimensional approach with goal setting and data gathering, and determining performance by reviewing supporting data (Derrington & Sanders, 2011). New Leaders (2012) describes the process as a continuous improvement cycle with data analysis and ongoing-self reflection, goal-setting and strategic practice, implementation and the collection of evidence, a mid-year review, a formal self-assessment, and summative rating at the end of the year. Although many principal evaluation systems include data and artifact collecting throughout the evaluation cycle along with pre and post conferences based on a direct observation of principals (Thomas & Vornberg, 1991), in actual practice principals report inconsistencies in processes used to evaluate principals (Davis & Hensley, 1999).

A critical factor in the evaluation of principals is for the evaluator and principal to understand the components of the evaluation process (Harrison & Peterson, 1988). Stronge (1996), in his improvement-oriented model for performance evaluation, makes a connection between formative evaluation and improvement as compared to summative evaluation paired with accountability. He further discusses the balance between accountability and improvement, "When evaluation is viewed as more than…[a] process, it gets in the way of progress and thus becomes irrelevant. When evaluation is treated as less than it deserves, the organization, its employees, and the public in charge are deprived of opportunities for improvement and the benefits that accountability afford" (Stronge, 1996, p. 145). Although summative and formative evaluation both have a need for inclusion in to the evaluation cycle, Popham (2013) delineates the difference between the two evaluative roles and describes how "contamination" occurs when one person is responsible for accomplishing both roles. This tension between formative and summative assessment occurs when supporting the improvement of principals' performance while using the same assessments to make employment decisions such as the renewal of a contract (Portin, Feldman, & Knapp, 2006).

## Research Design and Methods

This study examined principals' perceptions in a Mountain West state regarding supervision and evaluation within their own evaluation cycle. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own supervision?; (2) What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own evaluation?; and (3) What are the perceptions of novice and experienced principals' regarding formative supervision? This study followed a descriptive format and used a 20 item on-line survey to measure principals' perceptions regarding critical elements in their own supervision and evaluation cycle.

### Study Participants

Participants solicited included 275 principals from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, or schools including kindergarten through eighth grade and/or twelfth grade in a Mountain West state. All principals were invited to participate regardless of gender, experience, or educational degree. Out of the participants solicited, 102 principals agreed to participate (37% response rate). Principals were asked 20 questions regarding their own supervision and evaluation. The survey was sent electronically during the spring semester to all participants with one follow up reminder.

### Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was a survey constructed by the researchers based on the supervision and evaluation of teachers and adapted to represent the supervision and evaluation of principals. The first section of the survey consisted of 9 Likert scaled statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree), all focused on *supervision*. Items measured concepts such as meeting at least once a year to establish goals, discussing the principals' performance based on student achievement, and observing the principals in a leadership responsibility. The second section consisted of eleven Likert scale measuring *evaluation*. Items assessed concepts such as articulating a set of performance standards, using feedback to improve principals' performance, and identifying performance strengths. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire survey was 0.96. Reliability for each subscale was also adequate (supervision: 0.93 and evaluation: 0.92). The final section of the survey collected demographic information from the sample, which consisted of (a) gender of participant, (b) size of district, (c) years of experience as a principal, and (d) gender of supervisor.

### Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis included means and standard deviations for the entire sample. Data were also broken down by subscale and years of experience. Principals' experience was formed into two groups, novice (three years or less) compared to experienced principals (more than three years). This grouping was used to conduct an independent *t*-test examining differences between novice and experienced principals' perceptions of supervision and evaluation.

**Research Question One**

Research question one asked, "What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own supervision?" Nine items on the survey addressed this question. Means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 1).

Table 1
*Principals' Perceptions regarding their own Supervision*

| Statement | *M (SD)* |
|---|---|
| I meet at least once each year with my superintendent (evaluator) to establish goals for my professional growth. | 3.20 (0.87) |
| My superintendent (evaluator) observes me in a leadership responsibility at least once a year. | 2.88 (0.94) |
| During this conference, my superintendent (evaluator) and I discuss student achievement. | 2.84 (0.85) |
| I believe I improve my performance based on my superintendent's feedback and supervision. | 2.76 (0.82) |
| My superintendent (evaluator) meets with me to discuss how my performance will be assessed. | 2.75 (0.86) |
| My superintendent (evaluator) provides me with meaningful feedback during the school year. | 2.69 (0.87) |
| During this conference, my superintendent (evaluator) and I discuss remediation for marginal teachers. | 2.68 (0.85) |
| During this conference, my superintendent (evaluator) and I discuss how the school's faculty will actively engage students in learning. | 2.67 (0.87) |
| My superintendent (evaluator) routinely uses classroom walk-throughs to monitor classroom instruction in my school. | 2.32 (0.99) |
| *Total Supervision Subscale Score* | 2.75 (0.71) |

*Note*. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Overall, principals agreed with all of the nine statements regarding principal supervision as all statements had means higher than 2.50. Principals agreed most regarding meeting at least once each year with their superintendent to establish goals for their professional growth (*M* = 3.20, *SD* = 0.87) and agreed least with their superintendent routinely using classroom walk-throughs to monitor classroom instruction in their school (*M* = 2.32, *SD* = 0.99). With the exception of the first statement, principals had limited levels of agreement for the remaining seven statements as all had means less than 3.00. The total evaluation subscale score average was 2.75 (*SD* = 0.71).

**Research Question Two**

Research question two asked, "What are the perceptions of principals' regarding their own evaluation?" Eleven items on the survey addressed principals' perceptions of their evaluation. Again, means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Principals' Perceptions regarding their own Evaluation*

| Statement | *M* (*SD*) |
|---|---|
| My performance is evaluated at least once a year. | 3.22 (0.67) |
| During a summative evaluation conference, I am expected to reflect about my performance. | 3.08 (0.71) |
| My input is sought concerning my evaluation. | 3.04 (0.77) |
| My principal evaluation system clearly articulates a set of standards to rate my performance. | 3.02 (0.70) |
| During a summative evaluation conference, my superintendent and I identify my performance strengths. | 2.90 (0.85) |
| During a summative evaluation conference, my superintendent and I identify areas in which I can improve. | 2.90 (0.80) |
| I view my evaluation as valuable feedback. | 2.90 (0.84) |
| My evaluation accurately reflects my performance. | 2.84 (0.76) |
| At a summative evaluation conference, my superintendent and I discuss the things we agreed to focus upon during an earlier goal setting conference. | 2.81 (0.82) |
| A variety of information (teacher evaluations, budget, student achievement) is used to evaluate me. | 2.74 (0.86) |
| During a summative evaluation conference, my superintendent and I analyze the data he/she collected during school year. | 2.47 (0.86) |
| Total Evaluation Subscale Score | 2.91 (0.58) |

*Note*. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Overall, principals agreed with ten of the 11 statements regarding principal evaluation as eight statements had means higher than 2.50. Principals agreed most regarding their input is sought concerning their evaluations (*M* = 3.04, *SD* = 0.77) and agreed least with during a summative evaluation conference, "my superintendent and I analyze the data he/she collected during school year" (*M* = 2.47, *SD* = 0.86). With the exception of the first four highest rated statements, principals had limited levels of agreement for the remaining seven statements as all had means less than 3.00. The total evaluation subscale average score was 2.91 (*SD* = 0.58).

**Research Question 3**

Research question three asked, "What are the perceptions of novice and experienced principals' regarding formative supervision?" Principals with three years or less of experience were compared to principals with more than three years of experience using an independent *t*-test. Only two significant differences were found between novice and experienced principals. Significant results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3
*Perceptions of Principals regarding their own supervision based on years of experience*

| Statement | 0 – 3 years of experience n = 25 | More than 3 years of experience n = 79 | Effect Size |
|---|---|---|---|
| My superintendent routinely uses classroom walk-throughs to monitor classroom instruction in my school. | 2.76 (1.01) * | 2.24 (0.95) | 0.47 |
| I view my evaluation as valuable feedback. | 3.24 (0.93)* | 2.80 (0.79) | 0.46 |

*Note.* Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); * denotes significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Results of the independent *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in how novice principals viewed the use of classroom walkthroughs in monitoring classroom instruction when compared to more experienced principals, $t(102) = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, novice principals believed superintendents use classroom walk-throughs as a way to monitor classroom instruction (*M = 2.76, SD = 1.01*) than more experienced principals (*M = 2.24, SD = 0.95*). Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated. The interpretation for Cohen's d is defined as "small, d = 0.20," "medium, d = 0.50," and "large, d = 0.80" (Cohen, 1988). The effect size for this significant difference was approaching a medium effect size (d = 0.47). There was also a significant difference between novice and experienced principals perception of the feedback received in an evaluation, $t(102) = 2.34$, $p < 0.05$. Novice principals viewed the evaluation as more valuable (*M = 3.24, SD = 0.93*) than experienced principals (*M = 2.79, SD = 0.79*). The effect size for the significant difference between experienced and novice principals was also approaching a medium effect size (d = 0.46).

**Discussion**

This quantitative study was conducted to examine principals' perceptions regarding their own supervision and evaluation. The results are limited to the method employed and also to the perceptions of principals in a Mountain West state. The results of the study can be summarized as follows: overall principals were in agreement with 19 out of 20 statements describing their own supervision and evaluation, and principals with three or less years of experience believed superintendents used classroom walk-throughs as a way to monitor classroom instruction more than experienced principals. In addition, principals with three or less years of experience viewed the feedback in their evaluations as more valuable than experienced principals.

Principals identified meeting at least once each year with a superintendent to establish goals for professional growth, a conclusion supported by Thomas and Vornberg (1991). Analysis shows principals reported superintendents were conferencing with them and discussing how their performance will be assessed. During formative conferences, superintendents were discussing student achievement, how faculty actively engaged students in learning (Oksana, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012; Schlecty, 2001), remediation for marginal teachers, and how principals support effective instruction by developing and retaining teachers (Stronge, 2013). The informal and more formative process practices of supervision were supported by Vitcov (2011).

Superintendents were observing principals in a leadership role at least once a year but were not routinely using walk-throughs to monitor classroom instructions at schools. Vitcov (2011) recommended weekly contacts as a means to improve instructional leadership. Most principals were in agreement regarding receiving meaningful feedback during the school year and improving principal performance based on the superintendents' supervision. Informal feedback from the superintendent that occured during the formative supervision appears to be more important to principals than feedback from the summative evaluation (Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015; Oksana, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012; Viramontez, 2012).

Principals perceived their evaluation system as being clearly articulated with standards, which need to be specific and clear (Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005). These standards should be defined as "driver" behaviors (The Wallace Foundation, 2008), identifying "what should be, not just what is" (p.4, 5). Principals' agreed that their performance is evaluated at least once a year. This finding is in contrast to 12% of principals who were evaluated once every two or three years, eight percent of principals were rarely evaluated or not at all, and 80% of principals reported they were evaluated at least once a year (Protheroe, 2009). In addition, principals' input was sought concerning their evaluations, while Oksana, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) described this input as providing transparency and dialogue as a means to engage principals regarding their own evaluations. During summative evaluative conferences, principals reported their superintendents identified principals' performance strengths, areas for improvement, and expected principals to reflect about their performance (Reeves, 1998). Principals did not agree that superintendents and principals analyzed data collected from the school year during the evaluation conference. Principals believed their evaluations accurately reflected their performance and viewed the evaluation as valuable feedback. This perception regarding feedback is critical regarding effective evaluation (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015; Oksana, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012; Viramontez, 2012). A limitation of feedback from principals' evaluations is the lack of principals' ability to select appropriate professional development (McMahon, Peters, & Schumaker, 2014). A variety of information including teacher evaluations, budget, and student achievement were used in principals' evaluations. This principal perception is supported by Sanders, Kearney, and Vince (2012), who detailed using multiple forms of data including student learning, teacher effectiveness, and the performance of the principal as evidenced by the achievement of specific goals in evaluation.

Novice principals, those with three years of experience or less, perceived superintendents routinely utilizing classroom walkthroughs when compared to the perceptions of principals with more experience. There was also a significant difference between novice and experienced principals' perceptions of the feedback received in an evaluation. Novice principals viewed the evaluation feedback as more valuable than experienced principals, these perceptions of evaluation between novice and experienced principals is supported by previous research (Hvidston, Range, McKim, & Mette, 2015). As first year principals are frequently found to have deficient educational leadership skills including leading effective change, creating a shared vision, and collaborative communities (Cray & Weiler, 2011), it is possible superintendents increased their frequency of school visits and feedback because of novice principals' need for differentiated supervision (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). Also novice principals struggle with the transition to the principalship due to the complexities of the position (Nelson, de le Colina, & Boone, 2008). Formative evaluations for novice principals could contribute to their performance (Ginsberg & Berry, 1990). Approximately 50% of principals leave the profession within the first

five years of practice and many of these principals leave within their first three years (Briggs, Davis, & Cheney, 2012). Superintendents should spend more time in novice principals' buildings visiting classrooms and giving feedback to improve the performance of these novice principals and to create a trusting relationship, possibly resulting in the retention of effective principals.

**Implications**

Overall, principals were in agreement regarding important practices in the cycle of the supervision and evaluation of principals. These findings could be supported by several reasons. First, within the emergence of the importance of the principals' performance in the functioning of the school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), there is an increased emphasis on the supervision and evaluation of principals (Clifford & Ross, 2012: Connelly & Bartoletti, 2012). Second, as with novice teachers who require more instructional support (Zepeda, 2007), perhaps novice or inexperienced principals might require higher levels of supervision and feedback (Kearney, 2010) as compared to experienced principals.

Results from this study provide implications for those who supervise and evaluate principals, as well as for principals and those programs preparing both principals and superintendents. Principal and superintendent preparation programs need to emphasize these responsibilities in their instruction and coursework. Superintendents could refine their current practices engage in a continuous improvement focusing on instructional leadership from the perspective of the central office (Honig, 2012).

This study suggests principals are being supervised and evaluated – a claim limited to principals in a Mountain West state. However, the existing body of research is still limited (Sanders & Kearney, 2011) regarding principal evaluation. Future research might examine the processes for effectiveness of principal supervision and evaluation and ties to principal professional development. Researchers could also examine the discrepancy in responses in a more exploratory manner. Standard deviations in this study were fairly large for a 4-point scale and that was not explored. Another limitation is the low response rate. Due to the demands faced by principals during the school year researchers could consider targeting the months of January through March as researchers have experienced participants are more likely to respond during that time frame (Dillman, 2007).

When looking to the future, principal supervision and evaluation will continue to be important to the performance of principals. Principals need to be supervised in a differentiated manner based on experience and identified need. The focal point for the supervision and evaluation for principals will be a cycle of continuous improvement as evidenced by increased student achievement.

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