

AchieveNJ and Its Effects on Hiring Principals

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



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The study described the influence, if any, AchieveNJ might have on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. According to superintendents, there is not one accepted standard in principal leadership characteristics, although there are commonalities regarding traits associated with improving student achievement. The significance of this study is to unveil comparisons, distinctions, and conclusions about the impact AchieveNJ has had on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals, which will contribute to the literature gap on AchieveNJ. AchieveNJ was a new variable in the research and it forced superintendents to rank principal leadership characteristics. This groundbreaking policy is at the forefront of accountability and serves an educational milestone. The significance of the findings presented evidence that since AchieveNJ was introduced in 2013-14, instructional leadership was the most desired leadership trait when superintendents hire principals. Also, districts' and superintendents' demographic variables had no influence on the findings.

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Superintendents make recommendations to their boards of education to gain approval for the employment of a new principal. After the interview process, the superintendent makes a hiring decision on who is the best candidate. Obviously, there are external factors that influence their decisions. Each superintendent has his/her own set of most valued leadership characteristics used to assess the candidate pool, as well as in their selection of the successful candidate. A plethora of literature exists on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals, where a variety of qualities are valued by superintendents when considering a new principal (Arrowood, 2005; Clark, 2003; Dillon, 1995; Karol, 1988; Rammer, 2007b; Weber, 2009). Each superintendent has a different set of qualities they valued in principals.

Since 2010, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has been working on a new educator evaluation system with the intent to improve all educator evaluations (NJDOE, 2013a). In the 2013-2014 school year, New Jersey public school superintendents were obligated to follow the state-mandated principal evaluation system named AchieveNJ, which assesses how well principals improve student achievement. There is little known about the influence AchieveNJ might have on superintendents' hiring decisions and educational practice itself. This policy was initiated in the 2013-2014 school year in order to meet the accountability mandates for educator effectiveness (NJDOE, 2013a).

The NJDOE has, for the first time, unveiled a new standardized educator evaluation system, AchieveNJ, where summative ratings will depend, in part, upon the proficiency percentages in student performance on state assessments. This new evaluation tool will encompass teachers and principals. In preparation for the unveiling, a comprehensive planning and two-year pilot programs existed in 2010 (NJDOE, 2013a; "What you need to know," 2013; however, this policy has not been free of controversy nor has it been accepted by all stakeholders. The New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), and the Garden State Coalition are a few organizations who have voiced their concerns in the media and in writing against AchieveNJ ("Demanding a course of action," 2014; Keyes-Maloney, 2013; Garden State Coalition, 2013). There has been so much pressure and attack on the then New Jersey Commissioner of Education, Christopher Cerf, at the time of the unveil and enactment, that he released a broadcast memo identifying seven accusations from the NJEA and then responding with what he positions as facts (Cerf, 2014). Regardless if educators agree with AchieveNJ, it is a mandate that is approved, in progress, and must be instituted by school districts.

The assumption of the problem formulation is that while the literature helps us to understand what characteristics superintendents' value, it does not allow us to determine whether what they value could be influenced by the characteristics of the superintendents themselves. Over the last 3 years, the NJDOE has prepared for AchieveNJ's implementation, yet there has been resistance from teachers and administrators due to the newness of the policy, its rigorous standards, and percepts of its initiated abruptness ("New poll"; 2014; Mooney). The Commissioner of Education maintains AchieveNJ discussions have been collaborative with teachers' and administrators' unions from the start (Cerf, 2014). The NJEA and NJPSA maintain the exact opposite; their stance is that AchieveNJ was a top-down directive omitting their input (Keyes-Maloney, 2013).

This policy shift has created imperatives for school districts, such as tripling the amount of observations per year, documenting student growth objectives, measuring educator effectiveness by student achievement, and so forth, which were all not required in the past. Since AchieveNJ is in its inaugural year, it is unknown if this new mandate has influenced the hiring and selection of principals by superintendents or whether superintendents' own opinions of the new policy will

shape their hiring decisions. Moreover, does this new policy create a set of standards for district superintendents to follow? The purpose, therefore of this study is to describe the influence, if any, AchieveNJ has on superintendents hiring decisions. A substantial amount of literature exists on the qualities superintendents value when making hiring decisions for principals; however, within this literature base, superintendents' backgrounds influenced what principal qualities they looked for, such as their years of experience, education levels, district size, and so on (Arrowood, 2005; Clark, 2003; Dillon, 1995; Karol, 1988; Rammer, 2007b; Weber, 2009). Moreover, the principal characteristics superintendents' value may be influenced by the characteristics of each individual superintendent. Research provides evidence on the principal leadership characteristics that are valued by superintendents (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McEwan, 2003; Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004; Whitaker, 2007). These characteristics include administrative experience, instructional leadership, fostering community relations, management skills, and so on. Given the findings from previous research, there is a lack of substantial literature conducted on the impact superintendents' backgrounds may have on the desired principal leadership characteristics, specifically in the areas of (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications.

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to identify if AchieveNJ, the newly instituted educational evaluation system, has influenced New Jersey superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. Superintendents have their own set of most valued leadership characteristics to assess principal candidates, which can be influenced by their personal and professional backgrounds. The demand for this study is driven by the scant research about the effects AchieveNJ has on school districts, specifically in considering principal candidates. AchieveNJ ties principals' evaluations to student achievement, which never existed before; therefore, if principals cannot document improved student achievement, their job security and tenure are at risk. Hence, the principal plays a critical role in students' success. In an age of accountability, New Jersey is at the forefront of educational history. The literature helps us to understand the federal accountability regulations, evidence supporting principals impacting student achievement, effective principal characteristics, and superintendents' perceptions of the most valued principal traits; yet, it does not allow us to determine whether what superintendents' value could be influenced by the characteristics of the superintendents themselves, with AchieveNJ as a new variable in existence.

Although there is an abundance of research identifying leadership characteristics, there are also theory-based models identifying organization and leadership theories. Herron (1994) uses a historical approach to identify four ideologies in organizational theory: scientific management, human relations, bureaucratic, and open systems. Bolman and Deal (2008) have noted a similar concept in that they view organizations as acting in frames such as: political, human resource, structural, and symbolic. School leadership standards were also developed, and two popular ones are ISLLC, and NAEP (National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary Principals).

Leadership theories are vast, and there is not a one-size-fits-all as far as categorical names and models. The most frequently cited were leadership theories in trait, leadership behavior, contingency, charismatic, self-concept, transformational, transactional, constructivist, adaptive, power and influence, situational, and so on (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003; Gates, 2012, Hayes, 2012; Hopper, 2009; Larson, 2008; Maciel, 2005; Maness-Effler, 2012; Stewart 2012; Wiggins, 2013).

The two most popular theories, which many dissertations referenced are transformation and transactional leadership, which was introduced by Burns (1978). The discussion and distinction among the two can be summarized in stating that transactional is an exchange and transformational is about change.

While a significant amount of research and theories exist to define specific characteristics or qualities of effective principals and leadership, the fact that we cannot agree on a universal standard can be considered a research limitation. Additionally, there is no accounting for the research that points to socioeconomic status being the sole predictor of student achievement, inferring that regardless of the strategic steps principals and/or teachers take to improve student achievement, their success will depend upon the students' socioeconomic status (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972; Tienken et al., 2013; Turnamian, 2012). Hence, students' family background and income are strong predictors of academic success. This research is worth mentioning here, as it ascertains a social dynamic effect on student achievement.

The role of superintendents is to hire the best candidates, and their decisions are influenced by their own personal and professional characteristics. Baltzell, Dentler, and Abt Associates (1983) and the National Institute of Education were the first to author a national report on school districts choosing leaders. They found that "good fit" for the community and personal characteristics sometimes are the deciding factors of successful candidate selection (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). Contrary to Baltzell, Dentler, & Abt Associates (1983), Karol (1988) found that one's ability to relate to his/her school's demographics bears potentially greater clout than his/her professional qualifications; therefore, regardless of superintendents' decisions on whom to hire, there are multiple influential factors that fluctuate among superintendents.

In summary, a significant amount of empirical research proves classroom instruction impacts student achievement followed by school leadership, where school leaders possess certain characteristics, which have proven to impact student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). In fact, in almost all of the research reviewed, this concept was mentioned; therefore, there are characteristics that are desirable to superintendents when hiring principals. These characteristics are identified in 11 states and encompass instructional leadership, management skills, preparation and experience, communications and external relationships, and so on as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Highlights of Superintendents' Most Valued Principal Traits

Author	Highlights of Superintendents' Most Valued Principal Traits
Van de Water (1987)	Instructional leadership, commitment to academic goals, human relations skills. Less important was being a business manager
Karol (1988)	Educational experience and expertise, curriculum expertise, program/staff development, understanding teaching and learning, interpersonal skills.
Baron (1990)	Professional references, standard administrative certificate, teaching experience, alignment of candidate goals with the school system goals
Martin (1990)	Leadership characteristics defined as: decision maker, change agent supervisor/evaluator, facilitator, and curriculum evaluator
Dillon (1995)	Human relations & instruction

Muhlenbruck (2000)	Human relation skills, instructional leadership, experience, and organizational fit with district
Baker (2001)	Experience, decision-making skills, good judgment, sense of justice, community focus, and management skills focused on instruction
Clark (2003)	Administrative experience, teaching experience and leadership, specifically: curriculum, human relations, special education experience, technology, data analysis and finance
Arrowood (2005)	Creating positive learning environments, student achievement, instructional leadership, child focused, integrity, goal setting, visible, hiring great teachers, communicating, staff development, enthusiasm, data use toward student achievement, involving staff in decisions
Rammer (2007b)	McREL's 21 leadership responsibilities and six were significant and grouped as: Educational Vision/Practice, Conceptual Motivation, Awareness, Interaction, Achievement, and Adaptability. The four most important were: Communication, Culture, Outreach, and Focus. Communication was most important.
Weber, R. (2009)	Instructional leadership: classroom evaluation, motivate teachers to improve instruction. Communication and external relationships: working well with others and communicate in writing. Dealing with student conflict & creating positive learning environment. Preparation & experience: familiarity with district
O'Malley (2011)	Teaching experience, administrative experience, advanced degrees, human relations, instructional leadership,

What might be important to one superintendent might not be as important to another. Potentially, the superintendent's job scope, years of experience, district size, or other factors, might affect the criteria sought after (Weber, 2009). As the literature explains, superintendents hire principals, and their decisions are influenced by a variety of factors. The literature portrays the various characteristics superintendents consider when selecting a principal, and there is no agreement regarding what those characteristics are, although there are commonalities. Due to the newly implemented AchieveNJ, there is no research on the effects this policy might have on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals; hence, this is what this investigation explores.

Method

The population for this study encompasses the individuals who are New Jersey superintendents during the 2014-2015 school year, which consisted of 693 superintendents as identified by the New Jersey Department of Education's Public School Directory website. Superintendents must be employed in public school districts, as these superintendents are required to implement AchieveNJ. The array of public school superintendents in New Jersey consisted of rural, suburban, and urban

school districts, varying in grade configurations such as, K–12, K–6, K–8, 9–12, and so on and superintendents who were fulfilling the shared role of principal and superintendent as well as pure superintendents.

A purposeful convenience sample was chosen to identify and represent the population as to ensure a high success rate of return of the survey. Superintendents meet monthly within their county and that was how the sample was chosen. The total number of completed surveys was 61, which was a 64.2% response rate. A survey was the selected instrument to gather the data because the basis of this research involves how superintendents view AchieveNJ in relation to hiring principals. The most direct way to attain answers to questions relevant to this topic would be to survey superintendents. As noted by McKenna, Hasson, and Keeney (2006), the limitations to choosing a cross-sectional survey is that it gathers data in one point in time and does not account for changes in subsequent years (as cited in Coughlan, Cronin, & Ryan, 2009). The survey instrument was driven by three prominent studies of superintendents' perceptions on hiring principals (Rammer, 2007b; Reichhart, 2008; Weber, 2009) where intensive and thorough literature reviews of the effective characteristics of principals were synthesized and revealed.

The survey consists of six parts with five subquestions in each relating to AchieveNJ, instructional leadership, management, preparation and experience, communication, and superintendent background information. The first five parts asked superintendents to circle the level of importance they place on each item. The sixth part, consisting of five questions, asked for superintendents to complete background information about their district and professional characteristics. The content of each of the subquestions was driven by the literature review in Reichhart (2008) and Weber (2009) and was consistently echoed in the literature review. In the studies conducted by Reichhart (2008) and Weber (2009), their survey instruments, although different, had commonalities among the questions. Each survey endured a critique and field test for item reliability. Due to the nature of the current survey, the previous surveys' reliability is justified for the item content in this instrument.

Data Analysis

Survey answers were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and exported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 22.0) to prepare the results for analysis. Descriptive statistics and cross tabulation were used, which covered frequencies, mean, standard deviations, and scale scores. Additionally a 0.05 significance level was maintained. Results were interpreted using categorical methods of independent *t* tests, one-way ANOVA, chi-square test, and frequency distribution to determine if AchieveNJ has had any influence on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. The answers to the three research questions will be analyzed as follows:

Research Question 1 Analysis

To what extent are superintendents' hiring decisions of principals influenced by their opinions about the new policy AchieveNJ? What importance in their hiring decisions do superintendents place on (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications?

Research Question 2 Analysis

To what degree is there an association between a superintendent's background and the leadership characteristics that he/she values in the principalship?

Research Question 3 Analysis

To what extent, if any, are there consistencies across districts regarding superintendents hiring principals?

Findings and Discussion

When superintendents were asked to evaluate the importance of AchieveNJ regarding their hiring decisions of principals, specifically identifying if AchieveNJ impacted the importance attributed to: education policy, principal practice, principal accountability, improving student achievement, and hiring effective principals, 77% (47 out of 61) said that principal accountability was *very important* or *important*. This was the highest percentage on any part of the frequency tables with the entire survey. Moreover, the percentage of superintendents who rated all five of the AchieveNJ indicators were as follows: principal practice (72.3%), improving student achievement (67.2%), hiring effective principals (6.2%), and education policy (60.7%). Regarding the mean scores, this part of the survey had the highest range of the means (3.36 to 3.92). These results conclude that the majority of superintendents in the sample said that the AchieveNJ factors impacted the importance they placed when making hiring decisions for principals.

The second part of the research question investigated the importance superintendents' place on (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications. Of the 61 superintendents who completed the survey, instructional leadership had the highest ranges in the mean scores (3.41 to 3.64) and frequency table percentages, where 62.3% to 70.5% of superintendents rated the indicators of instructional leadership to be *very important* or *important*. The summary variable correlation also indicates that instructional leadership had the highest correlation with AchieveNJ ($r = .799$). These findings are consistent with the literature regarding the role of a principal is to be an instructional leader (Alig-Mielcarek, 2003; Dufour & Eaker, 1999; Marzano et al., 2005; Matos, 2006; Reichhart, 2008; Stronge et al., 2004; Valenti, 2010; Weber, 2009). The majority of superintendents' responses to this part of the survey indicate that AchieveNJ had impacted the importance they place on the indicators of instructional leadership, and they viewed it to be the most important characteristic among the other three.

The next part of the survey asked superintendents to respond to how AchieveNJ had changed the importance they attributed to the principal's ability to meet the indicators of management. The responses here identify that management is not as important as instructional leadership when considering leadership characteristics of principals. The summary variable correlation indicates that management is the least strong correlation with AchieveNJ ($r = .479$). The literature supports these findings where the paradigm shift is that the principal is expected to be an instructional leader rather than a manager (Glass & Bearman, 2003; Rammer, 2007b; Simon, 2003; Van de Water, 1987).

Part 3 of the survey questioned superintendents in the area of the principal's preparation/experience, regarding how AchieveNJ changed the importance superintendents attributed to the principal's ability to meet the subquestions related to preparation/experience. The summary variable correlations indicate that the principal's preparation/experience is the second most important area next to instructional leadership superintendents value regarding AchieveNJ ($r = .616$). This means that an effective and strong principal would have to have the background, preparation, and experience to be an effective instructional leader, which is supported in the literature base (Smith & Hoy, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Norton, 2003; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Part 4 of the survey related to this research question asked superintendents to respond to how AchieveNJ changed the importance they attributed to the principal's ability to meet the indicators of communication. The summary variable correlation places communication as second to last (or third among all four characteristics) in the ranking of most important indicators of hiring decisions considering AchieveNJ ($r = .597$). So, although keeping up with communication is a factor in considering a principal, it is third most important.

Simply stated, the correlation of summary variables show that the leadership characteristics superintendents' value most in priority order are: instructional leadership, preparation/experience, communication, and management last. These findings contribute to the substantial literature base regarding qualities of an effective leader and the array of characteristics superintendents' value (Arrowood, 2005; Cotton, 2003; Dillon, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2004; O'Malley, 2011; Van Meter & Murphy, 1997). It is interesting to note that the four characteristics were supported by the literature, and this study explains the ratings given to the four areas in priority order. The difference in this study is that AchieveNJ was the variable impacting superintendents' views on the four principal characteristics when making hiring decisions. One can infer that AchieveNJ has forced superintendents to consider the factors in rank order when hiring principals. It appears that the demands of AchieveNJ increase the probability that superintendents are more strategic when hiring principals.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order for this study to situate itself in the larger literature base, replication is the most important recommendation for future research. If this study were to be conducted in all 21 New Jersey counties in the 2015-2016 school year, we would have the most comprehensive data on the power AchieveNJ has over superintendents and their hiring decisions of principals. Furthermore, it would be extremely easy to conduct this study at all superintendent roundtable meetings in the 21 counties. Having these data will further tell the New Jersey Department of Education, state legislators, local government officials, superintendents, principals, and boards of education the impact this new policy has instituted on our educational system here in New Jersey. It will also provide some implications to how that fits into the larger federal mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Next, a task force should be formed composed of members from the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA), New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), New Jersey Executive County Superintendents, and local superintendents from all 21 counties to review the replication results of this study. In addition it is important to gather more information on how AchieveNJ is being received by local districts in practice and how its implications affect hiring decisions. This task force can also serve as the group to review the replication results of the future study recommended above.

Finally, principal preparation programs should be examined to focus more closely on providing specific guidance on how to lead instructionally. What are some of the evidence-based practices that help teachers become better instructors and what is the principal's role in the process? If principal preparation programs approach their curriculums from an instructional leadership standpoint, it would vastly change how we are currently preparing principals. Instructional leadership has to be the focus around all other standards of the programs. Also, principals should be versed in the components of AchieveNJ and how it will impact their role in

the school. There are great principals who have overcome AchieveNJ and supportive of the accountability movement, and striving principals should see what an exemplar looks like.

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