

# Practices that Support Leadership Succession and Principal Retention

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*Principals are instrumental to successful school improvement efforts and positive student outcomes. However, recent workforce trends, increased accountability, demands of the job, and turnover rates for school principals are worrisome. Succession planning is a systematic approach that involves all aspects of identifying and retaining leaders (Rothwell, 2010) including preparation, recruitment, selection, onboarding, induction, development, and retention. Although succession planning is underutilized in public school settings, it is one avenue to address leadership issues and help school district leaders meet their long-term leadership needs. This qualitative study examined the succession practices of five large school districts in Colorado by gathering the perspectives of principals and school district leaders. The findings indicate several actions that educational leaders can take to address the challenges of well-qualified candidates and the do-ability of the principal position. Findings further indicate that leaders may influence principal retention by differentiating support and purposefully fostering relationships. These findings might be used by other educational leaders to strengthen their succession practices and policies and affect the retention of school leaders.*

**Keywords:** principal retention, leadership development, educational leadership, succession, succession planning

In recent years, the role of the principal has changed from manager to instructional leader with an increased focus on accountability for results and evidence has accrued that demonstrates the importance of the principal in school improvement and student achievement efforts (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). During this same time, principal workforce trends have included turnover at “an unsustainable level” (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011, p. 1), an aging population as a large number of principals near retirement age (Gates, Ringel, Santibañez, Chung, & Ross, 2003), difficulties retaining principals in urban and challenging settings (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), and less job satisfaction among principals (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2013). The result is a dichotomy: schools and school districts need qualified leaders to implement school improvement initiatives, but increased demands and accountability have led to the disenchantment of school leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2011). This dissatisfaction, in turn, has created higher turnover and fewer applicants, which has hampered improvement initiatives (Brundrett, Rhodes, & Gkolia, 2006). This vicious circle of principal turnover is detrimental to school improvement and student achievement initiatives (Louis et al., 2010; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011) and is costly to school districts (School Leaders Network, 2014). Attrition may also be higher in schools with high poverty, ethnic minorities, and low performance (Fuller & Young, 2009; Goldring & Taie, 2014).

Practitioners and researchers have offered many explanations for perceived leadership shortages and high turnover rates. Leadership shortages are due to increased responsibilities and lack of support (Zepeda, Bengston, & Parylo, 2012), teachers not interested in serving as principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008; Kearney, 2010; Levine, 2005; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009), and principal salaries not commensurate with responsibilities (Whitaker, 2003; Zepeda et al., 2012). The reasons for principal turnover include increased accountability (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Rangel, 2018), desire to serve easier to staff schools (Beteille Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Gates et al., 2006), and desire to leverage position moves for better salary (Baker, Punswick & Belt, 2010). The rewards of giving back to the community, supporting teachers, having greater influence, and progressing on a career path have been overshadowed by the downsides of accountability pressure, lack of support, lack of job security, and demanding schedules (Kearney, 2010).

States and school districts are looking for solutions to solve the principal leadership crisis. Solutions to address the supply of leaders include making school leadership a more attractive career (Olson, 2008); revamping college and university preparation programs (Levine, 2005); and offering signing bonuses (Mitgang, Gill, & Cummins, 2013), alternative licensure programs (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011), recognition programs, salary adjustments, or pay for performance incentives (Kearney, 2010). Some have proposed clarifying roles and responsibilities (Olson, 2008), redesigning the structure of the position (Whitaker, 2003), making the position more doable by hiring other leaders to take on business or instructional roles (Tucker & Coddling, 2002), and limiting the number and pace of initiatives (Hargreaves & Fink, 2011). A third solution involves providing better professional development including specialized training for current and future leaders (Mitgang et al., 2013) and coaching and mentoring for new principals (James-Ward, 2013). Likewise, distributed or shared leadership has been found to make a positive difference on student learning and organizational outcomes and can be a productive response to principal turnover (Mascall, Monroe, Jantzi, Walker, & Sacks, 2011).

Although states, school districts, and school leaders are responding to the issues of principal workforce trends in a variety of ways, there has been little attention given to succession planning within schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Mascall et al., 2011). Succession planning

“consists of a systematic, long-term approach to meeting the present and future talent needs of an organization to continue to achieve its mission and meet or exceed its business objectives” (Rothwell, Jackson, Knight, & Lindholm, 2005, p. 27).

### **Conceptual Framework for Leadership Succession**

For this research, I used the conceptual framework forwarded by Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms (2011) that asserted that succession was a complex phenomenon and a feasible solution to school leadership issues when states, districts, and principals take steps to improve leadership development. Their model of succession describes a virtuous cycle that included six components: talent identification, talent development, selection, onboarding and support, evaluation and process improvement, and the development of future leaders.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

Given that schools in the United States experience high turnovers with a new principal every three to four years which has negative effects on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010) and that succession planning can help organizations fill leadership needs (Rothwell, 2010), the purpose of this study was to illuminate the nature, characteristics, and practices of principal succession leading to principal retention. Since minimal research has been conducted regarding school district succession practices (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009), a qualitative approach was selected to gain a nuanced understanding of the topic. This study delved into succession practices in five Colorado school districts with higher principal retention and/or teacher satisfaction regarding leadership from the perspectives of principals and the school district administrators that hire and supervise them. The findings may provide useful insights to be used by educational leaders to strengthen policies and practices to retain principals. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the principal succession practices of large school districts with high teacher satisfaction as reported on the Colorado Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey when controlling for student demographics?
2. What are the principal succession practices of large school districts with high principal retention rates when controlling for student demographics?
3. What are the policies and practices that school district employees believe influence the retention of principals?

### **Literature Review**

Louis et al. (2010) indicated that principals exert considerable influence on school improvement and that principals are uniquely positioned to leverage the human and institutional resources to increase achievement. Principals serve as a link between teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, and student achievement. Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) concluded that school culture, collaboration with colleagues, and principal leadership were predictive of teachers' satisfaction and intent to stay. Also, Boyd et al. (2011) found that teachers' perceptions regarding school administration had the greatest impact on teacher retention decisions among school contextual factors. Moreover, Beteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2011) found that principal turnover was positively associated with teacher turnover and negatively associated with student achievement.

These studies suggest that policies aimed at the recruitment of experienced principals may allay the detrimental effects of turnover on student achievement (Beteille et al., 2011), that improving school administration, especially in high-turnover schools, may be effective at reducing teacher turnover (Boyd et al., 2011), and that one of the most important actions that superintendents can take to improve schools is to hire principals who know how to provide a supportive, collaborative working environments for teachers (Johnson et al., 2012).

In one of the earliest works on principal succession, Hart (1993) explained that leadership succession can be disruptive with dysfunctional outcomes or have a positive impact on a school and its performance. Leadership succession has an impact on the culture of the school and teacher morale, individually and collectively (Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009) and rapid succession has been found to be detrimental to staff culture and morale (Macmillan, Meyer, Northfield, & Foley, 2011). Leadership succession is an intense process for teachers in which teachers' emotions can range from hope to fear, abandonment to relief, and expectation to loss (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). In studying the effects of principal turnover on teachers, Macmillan et al. (2011) found that rotation and hiring policies that served the needs of the district rather than the individual school hindered teacher trust in the new principal and had unanticipated consequences which could sabotage initiatives. However, when administrators, policymakers, and principals pay attention to succession issues, it is possible for schools and principals to change, develop, and grow because of leader succession (Hart, 1993).

## **Succession Planning**

In the private sector, succession planning has been a topic of research since the 1980s and leadership succession has become a major initiative (Fink & Brayman, 2004). Succession planning offers a viable solution to the issues of leadership recruiting and development to address the current realities of principal workforce trends (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). Unfortunately, in education, people believe that succession planning is needed, but is not practiced widely (Mascall et al., 2011).

Critical features of succession plans that had a high-impact on business were the inclusion of many leadership levels and positions (Groves, 2007; Lamoureux, Campbell, & Smith, 2009; Rothwell, 2010), actionable development plans that were reviewed regularly and included follow-through (Lamoureux et al., 2009), and the involvement of senior management rather than just the human resources department (Butler & Roche-Tarry, 2002; Lamoureux et al., 2009). Businesses use individual leadership development plans, job rotation, special assignments, and action learning projects as tools for succession (Fulmer & Conger, 2004). Managers are also an important aspect of succession planning because they provide training, performance feedback, coaching, and mentoring; create a supportive culture; and expose high potential employees to various stakeholders within the organization (Groves, 2007).

Succession planning has many benefits for companies and employees. It assists organizations in aligning human capital needs with strategic goals, addressing an aging management workforce, ensuring that leadership is ready in the event of an unexpected event, and conducting an inventory of human capital strengths and gaps (Butler & Roche-Tarry, 2002). While there are many benefits of succession planning, succession planners must acknowledge the dynamics and unique needs of organizations in terms of culture, industry, economic sector, leadership structure, and size (Rothwell, 2010). In schools, succession practices run counter to the egalitarian ethic of equal pay and opportunities (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011) and to the notion

that teachers should self-select into leadership positions (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Furthermore, procedures requiring job postings and competitive searches, budget constraints, and union agreements may prevent schools from using some succession practices (Rothwell, 2010).

While succession planning is not the norm and structured succession plans are rare in the field of education (Hartle & Thomas, 2006), Hargreaves and Fink (2003) noted that, “Education has much to learn from private sector about planning for succession” (p. 700). Hart (1993), in her seminal study of principal succession, urged those who appoint and support principals to act deliberately to improve the overall quality of succession processes through purposeful attention to socialization, orientation, professional development, mentoring, and evaluation. More recently, Zepeda, Bengston, and Parylo (2012) concluded that the theory of succession planning found in the private sector can be applied to school systems although there may be unique characteristics or practices within the school setting. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has articulated a need to stop “hire and hope” practices (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011, p. 5) and delineated succession practices that states, school districts, schools, universities, and principals can adopt as part of succession planning.

### **Succession Practices Related to Stages of a Principal’s Career**

Educational leaders are responding to the issues of principal succession in ways that affect school principals at three points in their career: before the principal is hired (practices for preparation, recruitment, and selection); when the principal takes on a new position (onboarding, socialization, and support); and through the principal’s career for (sustained retention through professional development, ongoing development, and evaluation).

**Preparing, recruiting, and selecting leaders.** There are several ways in which states, universities, and school districts are changing the preparation and selection of principals to affect the succession landscape. While certification is not a guarantee for quality candidates or for performance (Roza, 2003), state policymakers can influence the quality and content of preparation programs, standards, and certification requirements (Kearney, 2010; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Preparation programs can be overhauled to be more relevant to the realities of principalship and to include research-based content, curricular coherence, field-based internships, problem-based learning strategies, cohort structures, and mentoring or coaching (Black, Martin, & Danzig, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010). School districts can create partnerships with foundations, non-profit and for-profit agencies, grant recipients, and universities to supply their leadership needs (Fusarelli, Fusarelli, & Riddick, 2018; Levine, 2005; Orr et al., 2010). Some school districts have also adopted Grow Your Own leadership academies which Joseph (2009) claimed may help solve leadership issues and retain leaders because they are more cost effective, use internal expertise, and align with organizational goals.

Active recruitment of teachers with leadership potential is another approach to combat the shortage of leaders. Myung et al. (2011) found that “tapping” (when current teachers are approached by school leaders to consider leadership) had a significant impact on a teacher’s interest in school leadership. Finally, Stutsman (2007) recommended that school districts train administrators in the use of a systematic recruitment and selection process that includes web-based personnel systems, standardized interview guides, diversity and sensitivity training, and selection based on observation and/or simulation aligned to principal leadership standards. Some school districts have begun using competency models and screening tools that measure a principal’s

motivations and abilities to be successful to help place principals (Mitgang et al., 2013). Each of these practices may have potential to impact principal retention and succession.

**Socializing, onboarding, and inducting leaders.** By prescribing orientation events, activities, and timing, school district leaders can better control the outcomes of principal succession (Hart, 1993). Crow (2006) urged school district leaders to re-conceptualize the ways in which they socialized principals so that they stressed connections between the school district and the university, involved teamwork and collaboration, and emphasized the internship as an opportunity to interact with current principals, complex situations, and student demographics. New principals need to establish themselves quickly by practicing consistency, providing clear communication, and demonstrating congruence between words and actions (Meyer et al., 2009). School district leaders can encourage new principals to respect the school culture and improvement efforts that are already underway (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

States and school districts are encouraged to establish induction programs with clear goals aligned with administrator standards (Kearney, 2010) so that new principals are more successful and stay in the job longer. Support for new principals can include well-trained mentors, networking opportunities, and training on leading student achievement (Hart, 1993; Kearney, 2010). Mentoring or coaching can benefit a school district's efforts to recruit, hire, train, and retain school principals and should be part of inducting aspiring and new leaders (Stutsman, 2007). Coaching can help novice principals feel that their job is manageable, support job satisfaction of principals, and develop principal efficacy and skills (James-Ward, 2013).

**Retaining leaders.** District-level rotation practices or policies may add to the problem of principal turnover (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010) and have negative, unanticipated consequences (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Macmillan et al., 2011). Instead of systematic rotation, school district personnel are encouraged to adopt practices that lead to sustainable leadership including training, support, and encouragement for staff carrying out shared leadership and to leave principals in positions for at least four years, preferably five to seven years (Louis et al., 2010; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

Quality professional development that connects learning to practices, provides ongoing learning, and communities of practice supports principals to lead school improvement efforts and is an avenue for the ongoing support and retention of principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Parylo & Zepeda, 2015). Another path for principal retention is insisting that assistant principals learn and experience all aspects of school leadership including instructional leadership (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). Korach and Cosner (2017) noted recent approaches to leaders' development are professional development, mentoring and leadership coaching, principal evaluation systems, and leader supports. This may include the development of instructional leadership for principals through professional learning communities (Honig & Rainey, 2014) and altering the role and activities of principal supervisors (Gill, 2013; Rogers, Goldring, Rubin, & Grissom, 2019).

Finally, incumbent leaders are encouraged to take an active role in developing future leaders by creating a talent pool, encouraging staff to take on new roles, and developing a culture of leadership distribution (Brundrett et al., 2006). Current leaders can cultivate sustainable leadership by grooming successors, as well as planning and preparing for succession (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms (2011) further recommended that states incorporate the development of future leaders as a professional responsibility within principal standards to complete the circle of succession practices from preparation through individual development to the development of others.

## **Research Design**

In this study, I examined the phenomenon of principal succession through the eyes of the administrators who implement these practices and the principals who are the recipients of these practices. I used a basic, interpretive qualitative design (Merriam, 2009) to report multiple perspectives, focus on the meaning that the participants ascribed to the issue, and understand the phenomenon of succession (Creswell, 2007). From a constructionist, interpretative perspective I studied the meanings, intentions, and actions of the participants (Charmaz, 2001) by interviewing different stakeholders using open-ended interviews, constant comparative procedures, and participants' words in my analyses. The goal of the study was to bring attention to attributes and dimensions of the phenomenon of principal succession (Polkinghorne, 2006).

### **Research Setting and Participants**

Colorado is a state with 178 diverse school districts with large, medium, and small student populations located in rural, suburban, and urban settings without coordinated efforts to recruit, train, or retain well-qualified principals. In 2012, there were over 2,500 principals and assistant principals in the state of Colorado with a turnover rate of almost 17% (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2012a; CDE 2012b). Colorado had 11 private and public higher education institutions with principal preparation programs and allowed alternative licensure (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2013). In 2010, Colorado adopted Quality Teacher and Principal Standards for evaluation purposes and to which preparation programs started aligning in 2011 (CDHE, 2013). These conditions may affect the supply and demand of principals (Roza, 2003) and, thus, affect principal succession practices.

The Colorado Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey was administered to Colorado educators in 2009, 2011, and 2013 (New Teacher Center [NTC], 2013b). The TELL Survey is a full-population survey that is a statistically valid and reliable instrument that measures research-based factors that have been empirically linked to teacher retention and student learning (NTC, 2013d). When teachers were asked to identify the factor which most affected their willingness to keep teaching at their school, school leadership was ranked the highest (NTC, 2013c). NTC (2013a) recommended that states assess their policies regarding principal preparation, recruitment, induction, and support to ensure that through preparation programs and professional development leaders have the skills and capacity to build strong school cultures, positive trusting school climates, and supportive conditions for teaching and learning. Thus, Colorado had many factors which made it suitable for this study on principal succession practices.

### **Sampling Strategy for School Districts for Inclusion in the Study**

Since the purpose of this study was to illuminate the nature, characteristics, and practices of principal succession and there is no principal satisfaction survey data which identifies specific school districts in Colorado, I applied purposeful sampling to choose school districts for participation. A review of the literature supported using the following four factors: (1) size of district since it may indicate the need and urgency for succession practices (Roza, 2003; Zepeda et al., 2012); (2) student demographics since schools and districts with more challenging student populations have been tied to more principal mobility (Battle, 2010; Baker et al., 2010); (3) teacher

satisfaction, especially in regard to school administration, since teacher satisfaction has been connected to school leadership (Boyd et al., 2011); and (4) principal retention rates given that principal retention has been linked to school improvement and overall school climate (Louis, et al., 2010) and that retention may be an indication of working conditions (Boyd et al., 2011).

Through a combination of criterion, maximum variation, and theory-based sampling, I identified school districts for inclusion in the study. Large school districts that had over 5,000 K-12 students and over 350 licensed, school-based professionals and with at least 40% participation rate on the TELL Colorado Survey were considered. Twenty-two school districts were identified as possible districts for this study. Then, to minimize the possibility that higher principal retention and teacher satisfaction rates were merely a reflection of less challenging student demographics, I calculated a demographic score which equaled the percent of students who received free and reduced lunch benefits plus the percent of students who received special education services and the percent of students who were classified as English language learners. I reviewed TELL Colorado teacher satisfaction data concerning school leadership to determine one school district in each demographic group (low, average, and high) to investigate to answer the first research question. I then selected the district with the highest principal retention rates within each of the same three demographic bands to answer the second research question. One school district, Colorfield, had the highest TELL score and the highest principal retention rate for its demographic band (less than average), thus producing five participant school districts instead of six. Information for all five school districts is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Colorado School Districts for Study*

Location	K-12 2012 Pupil Count	Demographic Score	Site-based Licensed Educators	TELL % Participation	TELL Factor Score	% Principal Retention
State	833,200	66.12	60,900	54.52	78.17	83.31
School District						
Colorfield	27,100	44.23 low	1,950	73.32	85.00	90.28
Meadowview	8,900	60.68 average	600	56.02	76.87	92.86
Forestglen	5,100	65.53 average	350	41.64	82.27	83.87
Ridgetop	5,900	81.29 high	400	65.68	81.67	70.59
Riverbend	5,250	83.42 high	450	77.21	78.73	86.36

*Note.* Counts are rounded to the nearest 50. Demographic Score = % of K-12 FRL students + % of PK-12 ESS students + % of PK-12 EL students where FRL = Free and Reduced Lunch Status, ESS = Students receiving special education services, and EL = students identified as English language learners. TELL Factor Score = Average of Q7.4, Q10.1, and Q10.6 from 2013 TELL Colorado Survey. % Principal Retention = Retention of Principals from 2011-12 to 2012-13 as reported by CDE (2012a).

After securing permission to conduct the study in the selected school districts, I asked a key contact person in each school district to nominate other school district personnel and principals as possible participants. The study was approved by the university and participating school districts, and individual participants gave informed consent before participating. I took precautions to ensure confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms for all school districts and individuals.



Participants from each school district included a human resource directors and/or supervisor of principals, at least one recently appointed principal who experienced orientation and induction, and at least one veteran principal with at least four years of experience in the same school. It was hoped that this approach would produce rich and trustworthy data, and that the final product would help the reader better understand the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I spent one or two days in each school district and interviewed 18 participants including seven school district/system administrators and 11 school principals. The six veteran principals had at least 10 years of experience as principal in their current school. The five newer school administrators were in their first to fourth year in their position and included one assistant principal since all principals in Colorfield had more than four years of experience. Data sources included hour-long semi-structured individual interviews with the participants, artifacts related to succession practices, tours at many of the schools, and observations of induction, school board, or community meetings. Topics for the interviews were aligned to the conceptual model and included: succession activities that address a school district's need to create and maintain a pool of qualified and willing principal candidates; recruiting and hiring practices; programs and supports that help new and experienced principals to transition into new roles and continue to develop as leaders; and policies and practices that aid in the retention of well-qualified principals. I audio recorded the responses and took notes for review during the data analysis while taking customary precautions to protect the participants and the data.

### **Data Analysis**

I coded the data throughout the data collection using open coding, followed by axial coding. Some codes were subdivided and some subsumed under other codes and categories as I coded the individual data sets and began the constant comparative process (Merriam, 2009) and theme development. I analyzed the additional documents and observational data to support and verify participant responses. I wrote short drafts related to each theme and created charts, tables, or mindmaps of the ideas and themes, always trying to make sense of the compilation of data, rather than focusing on one individual or school district. Theme development was an outcome of decoding, categorization, and analytic reflection (Saldaña, 2013).

### **Provisions of Trustworthiness**

I built in strategies consistent with qualitative methodology during the design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases of my project to increase the trustworthiness of my findings. I triangulated sources (Patton, 2002) by comparing different types of data gained through interviews, documents, and observations, as well as comparing perspectives from different stakeholder roles and in different school district cases using constant comparative procedures. I used member checking to allow participants to review interview transcripts, descriptions, and emergent themes.

## Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to illuminate the nature, characteristics, and practices of principal succession leading to principal retention in select Colorado school districts.

The findings from this study support that school district leaders are responding to the issues of principal workforce trends in a variety of ways. The sampling techniques produced five school districts, which proved to be information-rich cases that yielded themes that are supported by the literature on principal succession, regardless of if the district was selected due to high TELL Survey results or high principal retention rates. As way of introduction, I will highlight one aspect of each school district's practice that participants believed help them satisfy their future leadership needs and retain leaders.

Colorfield, Forestglen, and Ridgetop school districts were selected to participate based on TELL Survey results which indicated high teacher satisfaction with leadership. Leaders in Colorfield did not have issues attracting experienced principals for any openings and therefore, the assistant principalship was not seen as a path for ascension into the principalship. However, the district leaders were focused on individualized support for the principals from the time leaders hired a new principal through the first couple of years in a position. This support included phone calls, text messages, and personalized visits and resulted in higher principal retention rates. Forestglen leaders focused on hiring principals that were a fit with their community. Once a principal was hired, the leaders used two specific transition activities to support principal success: a listening tour in which the principal listened to the needs and hopes of various stakeholders and an entry plan collaboratively developed with the district leaders that set goals and strategies for the first months. Ridgetop leaders focused on tailoring the job description and hiring process for each opening to find a good match between the principal candidate, the needs of the school, and the needs of the school district.

In addition to Colorfield, Meadowview and Riverbend were selected for participation according to high principal retention rates. In Meadowview, leaders had a strong commitment to the development of people within their system. They had a tradition of hiring from internal searches and 14 of the 16 principals had held other positions before being appointed to the principalship. They also used a cadre of former, retired principals known as "Principal Whisperers" to work with struggling principals and assistant principals "to get a hold of any of those deficiencies or needs before they actually become a principal," according to the human resource director. Riverbend was the only district with a formalized goal to attract and retain talent. Stakeholders across the community had come together to write a strategic plan with a goal of talent development. The five key strategies within the talent development goal were to align professional development with student learning needs, provide competitive compensation and benefits, develop leaders, create an exceptional work environment, and recruit the best teachers and leaders. Also, Riverbend had defined principal competencies which were used for hiring.

These findings are organized by research questions. Throughout the findings the participants are identified with their pseudonym and an abbreviation of their position in the school district as it may help the reader interpret the findings. The following acronyms were used: elementary (E), middle (M), high school (H), principal (P), assistant principal (AP), assistant superintendent (AS), and director of human resources (HRD).

## **Research Question 1: Succession Practices of School Districts with High TELL**

The first research question explored the principal succession practices of selected Colorado school districts with high TELL Survey results (Colorfield, Forestglen, and Ridgetop). Four themes emerged: the importance of stakeholder input, professional development focused on instructional leadership, attention to transition, and a focus on teacher-principal relationships.

School district administrators from these school districts were mindful to involve stakeholders in the hiring of principals, rather than focus solely on the needs of the district which can hinder improvement and commitment (Macmillan et al., 2011). They had a process that was used to solicit information about desired characteristics of the next principal and needs of the school. Second, principal meetings were a mix of business and ongoing professional development for the principals. School district leaders moved toward more professional development opportunities focused on building principals' instructional capacity (Parylo & Zepeda, 2015; Rogers et al., 2019; Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, & MacFarlane, 2013). The topics were timely and focused on high impact areas, such as the newly adopted teacher evaluation system. Finally, leaders in all three school districts provided a transition plan that was tailored to the needs of the incoming leader and situation (Gothard & Austin, 2013; Hart, 1993) and if the succession was planned or unplanned (Lee, 2015). The leaders were committed to making sure that new principals were set up for success.

The importance of the relationships between teachers and building principals emerged when analyzing data from the school districts with high TELL results. School district leaders stressed that stakeholders' input, especially teachers', must be valued and acted upon. Forestglen used a group of staff members who worked with the superintendent and cabinet regarding salaries, budgets, and other important topics. Likewise, in Colorfield, White (EP) remarked that it was "a very teacher-centered district," and both Turquoise (AP) and Pewter (AS) commented that recently the school district leaders had been more authentic in responding to teacher feedback. At the building level, principals discussed different ways that teachers gave input into how the school was managed. Principals also conveyed their belief in their teachers and their teaching abilities. White (EP) summed up the feelings of many principals by saying, "I think in our most successful schools, teachers feel empowered. They feel trusted. You know, we hire really smart people who make good decisions, so we don't really try to micromanage them. And when you have a school that does, they will leave."

Participants emphasized that principals must genuinely care about the staff and students. Oak (AS) stated, "Our principals have a bond with their staff and the ones that don't, are the ones that aren't principals anymore." Principals reiterated this sentiment such as Pine (EP) who stated that "It comes down to relationships ....We're in the people business, the people growing business." Likewise, Green (MP) had lots of little ways that she demonstrated her caring including calling, touching base with people, sending personal birthday cards, celebrating successes, and constantly affirming things that were going well. Lastly, school district leaders discussed that principals must be leaders "that people will follow" In Forestglen, they looked for leaders who wanted to establish close relationships with community members. In Ridgetop, they used perception surveys of the teachers, staff, and parents as part of the principal evaluation process. In all three school districts with high teacher satisfaction with the school leadership as measured by the Colorado TELL Survey, the relationships between teachers and principals were important.

## **Research Question 2: School Districts with High Principal Retention**

The second research question was used to explore the principal succession practices of three Colorado school districts with high principal retention rates (Colorfield, Meadowview, and Riverbend). Many succession practices were similar to practices in the school districts with high TELL Survey results. For example, the participants identified stakeholder involvement and input as important in the principal hiring process. Teachers were involved in several committees that discussed working conditions and, in Riverbend, they gave input into the creation of a new strategic plan. Likewise, professional development was provided on a variety of topics specifically designed to help the principals refine their instructional leadership skills. Two additional themes emerged from the school district leaders with high principal retention: leaders focused on individualized support and capitalized on unique features of their school community.

For school districts with high principal retention rates, differentiated and individualized support was an important theme. Principals like Green (MP) recognized the need for individualized support for principals saying, “I don’t think there is a one-size-fits-all something you would do. I think it really is about individualizing...Because my need with my experience is very different from a first or a second year principal.” Leaders like Eddy (AS) expressed an individualized approach, “I think a lot depends on the needs of the individual....Who are they and are they ready and what kind of support do they need?”

School district leaders capitalized on the use of current district leaders, retired and/or current master principals as coaches and mentors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). For example, Eddy coached and visited with each of the high school principals every one or two weeks. He offered feedback, checked on principal goals, and used a tracking form to record individual progress. In Colorfield, Pewter (AS) shared that he made weekly calls to new principals to check-in and that he provided guidance and funding for each principal to partake in individualized development. In Meadowview, each principal was assigned a mentor and, perhaps, a Principal Whisperer. Each Meadowview administrator visited principals regularly through scheduled and informal appointments for individualized support. Leaders in these three school districts seemed attentive and responsive of the need to provide individualized and differentiated support to help principals be successful and to retain principals.

Furthermore, leaders in each of these three school districts described unique characteristics of their district that they believed attributed to their success in retaining principals. Leaders in Colorfield commented on the strong community support and reputation of the school district. Leaders in Riverbend cited the area, the community, and relational trust as factors for retention. Eddy (AS) explained, “We’ve made a big commitment as an organization to relational trust and we’re working harder on that. So transparency, competency, clarity, fairness, those things that build trust.” Leaders in Meadowview mentioned the collegial relationships and ties to the community as reasons for retention. Additionally, Sage (HRD) concluded that Meadowview had a “unique set of factors” that contributed to higher principal retention such as a focus on internal preparation and training for current and future leaders, being an optimally-sized school district, and having a strong sense of how things were done, called the “Meadowview Way.” From the perspective of the participants, reasons for principal retention were distinctive to the individual school district.

### **Research Question 3: Practices that Influence Principal Retention**

Participants in the five school districts discussed several practices and whether they believed these practices influenced the retention of principals. These actions related to two of the challenges to leadership succession: having enough well-qualified applicants and making the principal job do-able. Participants in all school districts discussed professional relationships as a key to retention also.

**Adequate pool of qualified applicants.** Participants in the study had different approaches to strategies which could be used to improve the quantity and quality of potential principal candidates. Three of the school districts focused on developing assistant principals to meet their future needs for principal candidates which could be part of a principal pipeline (Korach & Cosner, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2013). Meadowview School District had a strong tradition of internal hiring, partnered with two different university programs, and employed Principal Whisperers to mentor assistant principals. In Forestglen, the school district administrators made sure that assistant principals would be ready for an appointment through their induction and mentoring programs. Riverbend had a recent focus on developing assistant principals through inclusion in district leadership meetings, instructional rounds, and induction tailored to their specific needs. Conversely, school district leaders in Colorfield and Ridgetop expressed that the assistant principalship was not seen necessarily as an ascension to the principalship. In those two school districts the selection and development of assistant principals was delegated more to the principal of the building.

Another trend in leadership development is recruiting or tapping rather than allowing leaders to self-select (Myung et al., 2011). Participants in this study held disparate views regarding the role of current leaders to grow and secure more future principals through tapping and encouraging teachers to become principals. For example, Boulder (MP) said “I encourage people if they are interested in it or if they come and talk to me” while Elm (HP) stated, “As a true leader, you try to push those people to what they can be great at.” Eddy (AS) in Riverbend recognized the underutilization of tapping by saying, “Sometimes people self-identify. We have not done a good job as a district of identifying talent and encouraging people.”

Researchers have suggested that school districts and universities forge new relationships so that districts have candidates that are well-prepared to enter the role of principal (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Harchar & Campbell, 2010). However, partnerships with university preparation programs were not well established in these school districts, except in Meadowview. Meadowview had a strong history of partnering with universities and offering preparation program cohorts which Sage (HRD) revealed had many benefits for the cohort participants and the district. Eddy (AS) in Riverbend was most critical of current preparation programs mentioning that some were not standards-based. Other participants felt that they had benefitted from various programs in the area or when a university partnered with them. Most school district leaders provided support for individuals through internships, leadership opportunities, and added responsibilities, but, as Peak (AS) stated, “We haven’t been real systematic about that.”

**The challenge of do-ability.** One remedy to the job of principal being almost undo-able is to distribute leadership and to empower more teacher leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). These school districts had a plethora of opportunities for teacher leaders, including committee leader, grade level or department chairperson, member of district-level and building level committees, or summer school principal. Likewise, the principals realized the value of their background experiences such as serving as instructional coaches, teachers on special assignment, or in other

leadership roles. However, these teacher-leader opportunities did not appear to be part of any intentional efforts to prepare more principal candidates in the future.

The role of the principal has become more complex and demanding in the last few years (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2011; Tucker & Coddling, 2002). Principals and school district leaders alike recognized this to be true and shared ways that school districts could address the challenge of do-ability. Participant principals recommended that school district leaders be mindful of the number of changes, make sure that the expectations regarding changes were reasonable, and ensure support to principals making those changes. Hargreaves and Fink (2011) recommended limiting the number and pace of external initiatives and participant school district administrators seemed conscientious and tried “take things off the principals’ plates.” Pewter (AS) in Colorfield discussed that he strove for high engagement and high satisfaction and that the district assigned less “minutia and hoops to jump through as other places.” School district administrators also provided flexibility in staffing so other leaders to take on business or instructional roles (Tucker & Coddling, 2002) and in budgeting to support school needs. School districts provided technical support through district office positions and departments as well as professional development geared toward the needs of principals in attempts to support the work.

The five school districts had many formal and informal supports in place to help novice principals and assistant principals. Some of the veteran administrators had noticed a recent, deliberate attempt by the central office administrators to provide support and training for new administrators and move away from the “sink or swim model.” Boulder (MP) noticed “a more thoughtful, reflective approach” to the retention of principals stating that in the past, “Principals would just come and go. And, if they stayed, great. And if they left, we’d just find somebody else.” Summit (EP) mentioned that that onboarding for principals and teachers was a new concept this year which she was hopeful would help stabilize the elementary principal ranks.

**Importance of relationships for retention.** Without exception, every one of the 11 principal participants contended that fellow principal colleagues in the school district were valuable, informal supports. Participants described their relationships with other principals using the following terms: “collegiate atmosphere,” mutually supportive,” “pretty close group of colleagues,” “a family,” and “a tight group.” Several of them mentioned that they frequently call other principals, especially those at their same level, to get ideas about how to do something, problem-solve, get advice, ask questions, or, simply, “bounce ideas off of each other.” Additionally, colleagues were perceived as supports when times were tough. Banks (HP) in Riverbend commented, “I think the culture of the school district is to have a team of people who are mutually supportive, work together, work really quite closely together.” School district leaders also noticed and encouraged the close, collaborative relationships between principals. For example, Pewter (AS) described the close relationships among the elementary principals in Colorfield as “a family” and as a factor in retaining principals.

In addition, supportive relationships between the principals and their supervisors and/or other school district administrators were cited by leaders in every school district as a factor for principal retention. These supportive relationships were characterized by accessibility and visibility of school district administrators, feelings of support and safety, and an evaluation process that supported growth (Rogers et al., 2019). The intentional efforts on the part of the central office administrators to be available and accessible “24/7” were noticed by the principal participants. Sedge (MP) remarked, “You can also call anybody above you...They [the central office administrators] encourage it....So it’s very, very nice.” Central office administrators from various departments were also in the buildings several times per week for regularly scheduled meetings

and informal visits just “to see how things are going” or “to check on me.” Stream (HRD) noticed that the increase of time that school district leaders spent in the schools made a “huge difference” for relationships and retention. School district administrators spent considerable with each of the principals for purposes of professional growth and supervision, thus indicating a shift from serving as managers of principals to developers of principals (Rogers et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2013).

Accessibility to school district leaders was often coupled with feelings of support. Both newer and more veteran principals conveyed that they felt supported, especially when critical issues came up. Brook (EP) said, “The whole leadership team makes me feel like I’m their focus.” Also, there was safety to ask questions or ask for help. For example, Sedge (MP) stated, “We’re [the principals are] not afraid of our supervisors and our supervisors aren’t afraid to have tough conversations if they need to with us. But we do it out of relationship.” Relationships were characterized as providing support and challenge. Sedge (MP) concluded, “We’re friends and we can mess up and challenge each other and push each other to grow and speak our minds without taking offense with someone.” Stream (HRD) concluded, “What keeps people here is their relationship with their supervisors and with their team.”

**Other factors for retention.** Improvements in salary or other working conditions have been shown as an impetus for principal moves to other school districts (Baker et al., 2010). However, participants in this study did not regard increasing principal salaries as a strong strategy for principal retention but expressed that providing competitive salaries may help. Rather, participants mentioned quality of life and the geographical location or characteristics of their community as an aid for retention. White, Cooper, and Brayman (2006) noted that principal succession issues can be compounded by the apprehension of younger candidates to embark on the principalship due to the complexity of the task and the dubious benefits. In this study, novice leaders expressed concerns about job security and demanding schedules, and they conveyed desires for more supports tailored to their specific needs.

In general, the leaders used a variety of practices that may influence the retention of principals, but there was little attention given to succession planning within schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006; Mascall et al., 2011). The various parts of the succession cycle seemed like distinct activities and there was an overall lack of understanding of what leaders can do systematically to increase the retention of well-qualified principals (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). Although most districts had documents to outline hiring, induction, and evaluation, participants indicated that there were few policies that guided the work to prepare, induct, develop, and retain principals. Only leaders in Riverbend discussed some succession planning through a focus on talent development as part of their strategic plan while most participants mentioned that that they had not thought about actions that school district leaders could take to improve the retention of principals.

## Conclusions and Implications

These findings, developed from the examination of the data and current literature, reveal several implications for educational leaders. Based on the findings of this study, educational leaders should leverage current supports for incoming principals such as induction, mentoring, and transition plans as well as provide continued professional development and instructional leadership support for all principals. Although the participant school districts and participants implemented leadership development strategies like partnerships and growing assistant principals to varying degrees, leaders might focus more intentionally on the development of teacher leaders and assistant

principals to fulfill future leadership needs. Moreover, leaders should apply the following strategies to retain successful principals: 1) be mindful of the workload to keep the work engaging and meaningful; 2) provide differentiated support, especially for newer administrators; 3) foster a collaborative culture among principals; and 4) build and maintain supportive relationships between principals and their supervisors at the district level.

Perhaps, the most important implication is to focus on supportive and collaborative relationships. In this study, the relationships between various stakeholders and principals, principals and their supervisors, and among principals were recognized as important to the development and retention of leaders. District leaders influenced the retention of the principals in ways that were centered on relationships also, such as differentiating support for individual principals, fostering a collaborative culture, and maintaining supportive relationships with the principals. A final recommendation is to formalize succession practices and policies (White, Cooper, & Brayman, 2006) so that changes in district leadership do not change succession practices. Recently, Parfitt (2017) developed an instrument which may help districts analyze perceptions of succession planning and a number of models for succession planning such as Dynamic Leadership Succession (Peters, 2011) have been advanced.

There are several limitations to this study. Participants in this study were limited to the small number of participants in five Colorado school districts identified through the sampling procedures described in the article. Although, the findings are not generalizable, I have attempted to help readers determine if the findings are applicable their setting by providing descriptions of the contexts and activities (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) and by using direct quotes and participants' words in the findings (Charmaz, 2001).

Given that succession planning in schools is a relatively new and under-developed concept, it is recommended that studies be conducted with a wider range of participants including those in other states and those from school districts with higher turnover or lower teacher satisfaction to explore similarities and differences. Since this study also revealed some differences between principals nearing retirement and younger school leaders, additional studies that explore these differences could provide recommendations to support the next generation of principals also.

Schools will continue to need well-qualified principals that are committed to leading today's schools. School district leaders have an interest in hiring and retaining school leaders who are a good fit for their school district and will serve as long-term effective leaders. Succession planning can improve both the quality and quantity of leaders. This study of the succession practices in five Colorado school districts provided insight into several actions that educational leaders can take to address two major challenges regarding the principalship: developing adequate potential principal candidates and retaining successful principals. All of these actions could be fortified through the development of more formalized succession plans. Without strong succession practices, school district leaders may continue to struggle to fill these positions and jeopardize the future success of schools and students.



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