School Leadership Review

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Fall/Winter 2021*

Article 1

October 2021

Secondary Principal Leadership and the Impact on Engaging Hands-on Learning Strategies

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Recommended Citation
Morrison, Sarah and Thompson, Ray (2021) "Secondary Principal Leadership and the Impact on Engaging Hands-on Learning Strategies," *School Leadership Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol16/iss1/1

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Cover Page Footnote

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SECONDARY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND THE IMPACT ON ENGAGING HANDS-ON LEARNING STRATEGIES

INTRODUCTION

Principal leadership is paramount in schools today (Lantz, Hansen, & Antoni, 2015; Lu, Jiang, Yu, & Li, 2015; Murray & Clark, 2013). Students are the cornerstone of schools and thus need good leaders who can impact their learning in positive ways (Reilly, Clavin, & Morrissey, 2016). Campus principals are necessary in the school environment and are key components to consistency and standard-setting in education (Najera, 2017; Rossberger & Krause, 2015; Rossingh & Dunbar, 2012; Whittington, 2014; Will & Dunaway, 2017). Therefore, "bringing new ideas into schools is largely dependent on the principal's skills and everyday motivation to adopt and facilitate new ideas within their school communities" (Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhalto, 2016, p. 452).

DuFour and Marzano (2011) suggested that principals need to possess a repertoire of methods to guide teachers into 21st century educational strategies. Principals should engage teachers in best practice strategies so they can, in turn, engage their students through similar collaborative measures (Reilly et al., 2016). Hoy and Miskel (2013) discussed principal leadership and the ability for this to move a school forward to better engaging students in excellent learning strategies. They noted that "leadership . . . is a combination of behaviors characterized by collegiality, consideration, and initiating structure to improve student performance" (p. 311). Campus leadership and the emotional capabilities of those leaders affect the educational environment and act as strategic factors in the successful functioning of the school (Farahbakhsh, 2012).

Secondary principals continuously work with teachers in a team setting in order to engage best practices (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Murray and Clark (2013) stated, "Researchers in educational leadership have called for a new sustainable model for the future…this means that we must 'depart from the familiar' and radically rethink" (p. 291) classroom management and leadership concepts should function. Li, Hallinger, and Ko (2016) contended that hands-on learning is necessary to engage student and build capacity. Students need to attain concepts for their own benefit; however, the teachers must be engaged by the principal to lead to this accomplishment. The principal acts as an agent of change for the school as a whole and for how the teachers convey vision for collaborative learning to the students (Murray & Clark, 2013). Adams, Olsen, and Ware (2017) asserted that students who are not challenged in school often feel lost and bored, contrary to the foundational purpose of education—inspiring lifelong learners.

Hands-on learning strategies take many different forms in the classroom; however, the goal is always engagement of students (Arlestig & Tornsen, 2014; Batagiannis, 2011). The campus principal must ensure that the teacher is engaging students in their educational pursuits, and not creating the same pattern of worksheet behavior that drives students to be less engaged (Arlestig & Tornsen, 2014; Batagiannis, 2011). The key to building engagement in teachers is to create elements of leadership that the principal can assist them with from a team mentality (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Leadership for the campus principal matters, and "the principal of a school must understand how the limitations, resources, and opportunities of the context of his/her school impact how he needs to behave in order to be effective" (Garrett, 2015, p. 5). Teachers must trust the principal and allow him or her to engage them in bettering their craft. Principals should take interest in and advise teachers on appropriate, quality professional development (PD) to help those teachers be more successful (Arlestig & Tornsen, 2014; Batagiannis, 2011). Garrett (2015) noted that when a principal makes a decisive move regarding training or development of a teacher, the teacher should be able to trust the context and know that the desired goal for all parties is bettering the craft, which then betters the learning outcomes for students. A teacher's reaction to the principal often dictates how learning in the classroom will function; therefore, trust in that leadership is crucial.

Problem/Significance

Campus principals tackle administrative tasks while acting as instructional leaders, which can impede their abilities to be wholly effective (Soini et al., 2016). Principals sometimes feel that they do not have the time necessary to incorporate hands-on training with teachers during day-to-day operations (Dhuey & Smith, 2016). Secondary principals who only observe teachers do not have the consistency to engage teachers in pursuing the best strategies to help students be more effective (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Hoy and Miskel (2013) discussed the Lee and Scute model of academic achievement and how it relates to campus principals. They noted that "successful learners use a mix of strategies to engage in the work of learning as they monitor and manage their own progress" (p. 215), thus allowing students and teachers to navigate academic needs that arise within the classroom.

Without hands-on learning strategies, teachers may become ineffective and redundant (Dhuey & Smith, 2016). The purpose of engaging learning becomes more simplistic in nature—if students are moving and engaged, they will be more successful in the school environment (Soini et al., 2016). The issues that tend to arise become more pronounced in nature when one looks at the classrooms of today (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Dhuey and Smith (2016) stated that students who are bored, find material repetitive, or are denied inclusive measures tend to lack engagement and often act out as a result. Furthermore, the lack of implementation of critical thinking techniques results in many classes functioning on basic levels because of the lack of understanding and willpower from the teachers and students in the classroom.

According to DuFour and Marzano (2011), steps are needed to enhance learning concepts and raise the levels of support for teachers as they implement new strategies. The goal of campus administration should be to train and engage teachers in best practices, so that they feel prepared for the higher level of critical thinking that has become necessary for students of the future. To accomplish this goal, campus principals must remain consistent in their roles as instructional leaders to both alleviate teacher concerns and convey the value of learning excellence in the classroom (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Farahbakhsh, 2012).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to understand how secondary campus principals build capacity in teachers to actively engage students in the processes of meaningful learning. Principals are the instructional leaders of their respective campuses, and the researcher in this study sought to understand how campus principals build capacity in teachers to actively engage students in the processes of meaningful learning as evidenced by comprehension and application. Without the process and understanding of leadership theories, campus administrators may not develop protocols that lead to decisive action needed to make positive changes and achieve success on their campuses (Somech, 2005).

A theoretical framework guiding the present study was the path-goal model by House (1971), which delineated the four styles of leadership as directive, supportive, participative, and achievement oriented. This lens can be used to view campus principals and their differences according to personality, perspective, and understanding of the position (Bryk, 2015). Despite individual characteristics and leadership styles, a principal being forthcoming and providing clarity in teacher expectations can alleviate concerns for all parties (House, 1971).

Hoy and Miskel (2013) discussed another framework related to the model of essential support for academic achievement. Based upon a 2015 study by Hoy and Miskel (2013) discussed this framework, which includes three levels regarding the collective efficacy for teachers and their attitudes regarding the learning environment. This ideology includes the concepts of a culture of optimism and an established rapport with students. To that end, the optimal classroom environment can be established by the teacher working to “foster collective efficacy, create collective trust, and strengthen academic emphasis” (p. 199). Similarly, principals engage in teacher efficacy and build rapport by understanding the type of power they hold (French & Raven, 1959). The goal at the campus level is to create situations in which “teachers and students experience academic achievement, see models of success in environments free of unnecessary stress, and are persuaded by others to believe in themselves and their capabilities” (Hoy & Miskel, 2013, p. 199) thus allowing academic growth to take place long term (Bryk, 2015).

The deduced educational supports and needs based upon school administrators who have an understanding of instructional leadership and shared leadership point toward the Vroom and Yetton contingency model of leadership as a framework and the participative leadership model as a part of the path-goal theory (House, 1971; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Nystrand, 1981; Somech, 2005). These models of leadership inform the work of administrators on school campuses. The Vroom and Yetton contingency model assists leaders in developing decision models to process in group and/or individual settings related to the culture of optimism and academic achievement (Bryk, 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Nystrand, 1981). The purpose of the model ensures the leader is guided by the specific issues in a situation and chooses the approach for optimum success based upon the path-goal theory (House, 1971; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Nystrand, 1981). Campus administrators need to be capable of identifying the current issues faced by their staffs and making positive decisions that will benefit student learning outcomes while engaging them in hands-on strategies (Bryk, 2015; Lantz et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015; Murray & Clark, 2013; Najera, 2017; Reilly et al., 2016; Rossberger & Krause, 2015; Rossingh & Dunbar, 2012; Vroom & Jago, 1978; Whittington, 2014; Will & Dunaway, 2017).

Hands-On Learning

Hands-on learning is defined for this study as: structured elements in teaching that require a student to expend more engagement and consideration to the lesson (Kitchen et al., 2016). This type of learning requires student engagement and allows for posing higher order thinking questions on deeper levels (Marzano, 2007). According to a study by Ahfeld (2010), teachers who participated in hands-on learning found themselves saying the following:

> I tried new things without stress of doing something wrong; I allowed myself to dream; I allowed myself to question; I was able to participate with a group that I would not have tried; I gained more confidence, and I had the freedom to explore. (p. 18)

Ahfeld (2010) concluded that students need these same concepts to be successful. They need to feel secure and possess the ability to try new things that go beyond a worksheet in order to be more successful long term.

Principal Leadership

According to Soini et al. (2016), pedagogical leadership is necessary for the campus principal to function as an instructional resource for teachers. Engaging students with a new skillset is a direct component of student engagement and success and mirrors the principal’s leadership style. These researchers stated that the “implementation of school reform at a local level provides transformative and distributed leadership strategies that empower teachers’ collective and individual professional learning, and contribute to their autonomy to renew instructional practices towards the goals adopted in development work” (p. 453). Student outcomes are necessary data points for leadership, and a collaborative environment is based in instruction and the structure of PD. DuFour and Marzano (2011) furthered that idea by asserting that a school cannot be consistent without instructional leadership.

Strongly performing schools function as pillars of instructional learning; therefore, it is imperative to note the impact of the campus principals and their personal focus on leading teacher learning, which drives student success (Farahbakhsh, 2012; House, 1971; Soini et al., 2016). Campus principals strive to relate and build repertoire with teachers in order to branch out and serve the student body by serving their teachers (Service, Dalgic, & Thornton, 2016).

Soini et al. (2016) discussed the trend of encouraging schools to create a pendulum of topics or slogans that are supposed to change learning that did not actually achieve the goal. The research noted that “school reforms, no matter how well conceptualized, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited, often tend to fail in the face of the reality of everyday school life” (p. 455). According to Farahbakhsh (2012), this is an indicator of the type of learning that must remain in schools, and how perseverance and dedication make an impact on the students and their learning more than the proverbial bells and whistles of educational acronyms.

Relationships

According to Hoy and Miskel (2013), establishing a system of trust within the school and students is beneficial in for cooperation and openness. They stated, “trust relationships are built on . . . interdependence, the interests of one cannot be achieved without the alliance of the other" (p. 193), and this holds true for students and teachers. One challenge that arises is that many teachers do not look outside their own classroom walls to engage their students with the community, and school leaders often encounter the same issue because of time management (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Soini et al., 2016). When working to implement such developmental plans, things can become convoluted and difficult, thus causing doubts to arise for the teachers and their personal validity (Soini et al., 2016).

O'Donovan (2015) concluded that different principals have specific accountability actions based upon their perspective and challenges to overcome as school leaders. The O'Donovan study (2015) addressed the measures relating to higher accountability for leaders in the Irish school system, and it was noted that leaders who utilized the team model fared better than those who did not and enjoyed better buy-in from their faculties. In the study by Kitchen et al. (2016), it became apparent that principals who relied on team building and goal setting with their teachers fared better than their counterparts. If a leader is able to delineate some of the work and responsibility when appropriate, then the organization is more likely to respond to the needs of the whole (House, 1971). Kitchen et al. (2016) also communicated the value of the principal's understanding of what the team mentality needs to become for maximum impact on the school. In their study, they found that principals who were uncertain of what was happening in the classroom brought about campus goals that were vague or ineffective. Through effective, respectful leadership, consistency can be achieved across the curriculum for fidelity in the educational environment.

Garrett (2015) concluded that when considering how large and small schools are affected by principal leadership style, is important to note the relationship between the size of school and how the leadership needs to behave to effective. It was found that smaller schools felt more like families and the leaders more apt to visit with families. Furthermore, these principals got to know students and teachers on a personal level; whereas, in the larger school context, it became more convoluted and political at times.

The elements of leadership as a principal are important to note, and many theories exist to describe principals and their roles in the school. For example, in the study by Paletta, Alivernini, and Manganelli (2017), it was found that there are mediating factors, such as teachers and students, that directly impact the principal's approach to leadership. This idea relates to school context and how the school functions based on several variables and the culture created within. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) noted the importance of principals developing a thorough understanding how to best work with teachers and how principal-teacher interactions impact classroom instructional practices. The goal is for the principal to become a facilitator of learning, and it was found that if teachers felt trust with their colleagues, they were more likely to create a collaborative environment for shared best practices as opposed to simply looking to the principal for leadership. The purpose is to consistently engage the teachers and not to simply be the ultimate question/answer principal that everyone must rely on.

Student Learning and Engagement

Dormann et al. (2016) asserted that principals who care about students are highly noteworthy, and innovation and creativity are necessary in schools for student growth. Schools must encourage innovative techniques in order to drive the creative process for teachers and students. The idea that the principal's work engagement affects teacher creativity is not a new notion; it is justified in evidence. Teachers do work closely with their administration, and the manner in which a principal works with the faculty either impedes or encourages progress, therefore directly affecting student learning and engagement.

Adams et al. (2017) pointed to research that principals also have an effect on students' psychological development. Administrators who interact with teachers about student psychological needs and their instructional practices bring about better learning environments in their schools. These leaders recognize that students possess different capacities and work to develop a corresponding school culture of engagement. Student learning capacities need to be considered when developing processes for identifying student learning components. These practices should align to "resources within schools that enhance teaching quality and social processes that drive professional learning" (p. 558), and both of these should be balanced to engage all parties and measure effectiveness in the classroom.

Adams et al. (2017) further explained that to navigate what a student should be able to learn, "cognitive and noncognitive traits that function as internal resources for peak performance and social environment that ignites these resources" (p. 558) should be investigated. These researchers concluded from their own study positive interactions bring out the best potential in students while negative interactions create issues for students and their learning capacities. If the goal is to engage students in developing higher learning processes, encouraging this type of positive behavior is necessary as it has been shown to be beneficial for other students.

Arlestig and Tornsen (2014) found that the single most important aspect of a school functioning at an excellent level is the principal, and the teachers are close second. Each school leader makes an impact, positive or negative, upon the school and how it functions. The goal of administration should always be to is to engage collaboration across the school performance indicators.

Adams et al. (2017) stated that as education is becoming more detailed and even complicated as time progresses, “colleges, the workforce, and society at large expect schools to produce creative and innovative thinkers capable of transferring what is learned in classrooms to real-life problems and situations” (p. 557). Reaching these higher expectations takes an integral team to engage students and teachers into rethinking how education should function. Principals are the leaders of this team, and teachers look to them to identify the weak and strong areas of the school.

Adams et al. (2017) also noted that students should be able to identify and combine resources to achieve and overcome challenges in their daily lives. They must also be able to identify not only cognitive tasks, but also analyze and synthesize information to truly be prepared for their future. Beyond academics, it is the “social side of school and classroom life that energize the cognitive and noncognitive resources for students” (p. 558). Students learn in various, specific manners in the classroom environment, and administrators should be engaging in the functionality of those classrooms.

According to de Brabander and Martens (2014), when considering the motivational needs of students, it is important to investigate the systems of reward for behavior. Numerous studies have “been carried out on the effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation” (p. 29) and the realization that if one person holds all the control in the environment, it causes issues for student engagement. Understanding levels of motivation for students with self-dependency relates to how teachers and administrators glean viewpoints. Further, students tend to be more motivated when teachers view them as sponges to be given information rather than vessels to be filled. Mitigating factors can and will cause issues for students if teachers and administrators view motivation as something that must be done instead of something that can be developed. Students tend to rise to the level of expectation required and, conversely, will fall to the level allowed. Teachers have the same motivational factors, and administrators should understand how they to motivate faculty. Expectation related to performance and value for that performance are intrinsically necessary to develop motivational tendencies for teaching and learning.

Theories and Frameworks

Nystrand (1981) stated that, through the Vroom and Yetten model, the leader must possess sufficient information to make a good decision unilaterally, the extent to which [the teachers] have necessary information, the importance of commitment to effective implementation, and likelihood that an autocratic decision would be accepted, and the extent to which [teachers] are likely to disagree. (p. 262)

For a principal, the implementation of this model impacts how decisions are made and, consequently, received. According to Vroom and Yetton (1973), this idea relates to the normative model as the principal is key to the cohesiveness of the team, and the team's acceptance of decisions made directly relates to commitment to and effectiveness of instruction in the classroom.

According to Kegan and Lahey (2009), the campus principal strives to engage teachers with concepts related to the self-transforming mind, and evaluation of that principal is imperative in order to "challenge existing processes, inspire shared vision, manage conflict, solve problems, delegate power, and build relationships" (p. 21). Further, the authors asserted that sometimes what appears to be reality is not what actually is happening; therefore, administrators need to consider the emotional stability of all parties. When close analysis results in necessary change,

> to lead a . . . school to the next level, a principal needs to be more receptive to new ideas, more flexible in their responses, especially regarding new definition, definitions of roles

> and responsibilities, more open to delegating and supporting new lines of authority. It needs to be a team approach, not simply a principal approach. (p. 33)

Successful implementation of this ideas is achieved by allowing campus principals to navigate how their leadership will function based on the needs of their schools (House, 1971; Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Building capacity in teachers is directly related to the leadership model of the campus principal, such as the path-goal theory (House, 1971; Nystrand, 1981). If teachers do not understand how leadership affects hands-on learning, then the misconception can be carried over into the classroom and the resulting student engagement. Participative leadership relates to joint decision making between a campus principal and teachers based on the needs of the school (Brouillette, 1997; House, 1971; O'Hair & Reitzug, 1997; Somech, 2005). Campus administrators must ensure that their teachers feel heard and validated, providing them ownership and engaging them in developing new curriculum and better methods of student engagement (Somech, 2005). Nystrand (1981) furthered this idea by noting that in the Vroom model of shared decision making, engaging teachers in accepting decisions is a key aspect of campus leadership. Participative leadership has been shown to increase the quality of decisions made at the school level, contribute positively to teachers and their work lives, and engage teachers in higher levels of motivation by allowing them to have an opinion that allows for action (House, 1971; Somech, 2005

Research Method and Design

The narrative inquiry qualitative design was the appropriate approach for the current study as it allowed the researcher to tell the stories of the selected secondary principals through their own eyes. Narrative research allowed the researcher to look at the life of more than one individual and tell the stories of the administrators and their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher chose narrative inquiry as the method is more of a "creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.42).

Interviews were conducted, and the researcher coded them to align with themes that emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current research explored how secondary principals work with teachers to create better student engagement in the classroom, and how it relates to hands-on instruction and active engagement. Issues such as the day-to-day operations and how the secondary principal manages them, as well as crisis situations that arise and their effect on being an instructional leader were discussed to elicit a true picture of the challenges these administrators face regarding time management. Meaningful learning was discussed in the structure of active student engagement with hands-on strategies.

Sample Selection

The researcher sought approval from four school districts in Northeast Texas as the study began. Approval was given by the superintendents (Appendix B), and the researcher began reaching out to secondary campus principals via email, inviting them to participate pursuant to their district protocols. The participants were diverse in their experience range, from ages 30–65 years of age, and possessed varying degrees of experience as secondary campus principals. Each participant received a consent letter and was provided the criteria and expectations of the study. The participants responded via email with the signed consent forms. They were informed that it is a voluntary study and they are able to opt out at any time. Each participant chose a time most convenient for their schedules, and the interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes to 1 hour via Zoom.

The researcher incorporated random purposive sampling in order to provide the most consistently true results and elements (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008; Saldana, 2016). It was noted that the sampling would allow for credibility and reliability for the interviews within the study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

Trustworthiness

The researcher understood the ethical concerns that could arise by the personal nature of the interviews. The standard was to have a signed permission letter before the interviews began and a reminder that the interviewee could opt out at any time. The interviews were recorded, and the recordings were saved onto a password protected computer for 5–7 years with the dissertation chair. The notebook with observations will also be locked in a cabinet in the chair's office for 5–7 years. Only the researcher and advisor have access to the files, and coding was anonymous with pseudonyms to ensure no names were used in coding or transcriptions. The purpose behind a study is to glean the true story, and this cannot happen if safeguards are not in place to protect the documents, audio, video, and personal information.

Findings

This study was conducted using a qualitative narrative inquiry method to allow the researcher to develop an understanding of lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher sought to be "a good listener in the special way a story requires, not[ing] the manner of presentation . . . and the degree of enthusiasm . . . and coherence" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 13). The goal was to engage the secondary principals in understanding their views relating to hands-on learning strategies and engagement. The findings are presented in no particular order of importance.

Coding allowed the researcher to break "the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead towards further questions about the data" as qualitative inquiry "demands meticulous attention to language . . . and deep reflection on the emerging patters of human experience" (Saldana, 2016, p. 9, 11). The researcher approached this process with the understanding and realization that coding interviews and creating themes is "an interpretive act . . . a way to solidify our observations into concrete instances of meaning" (Saldana, 2016, p. 5-6). The researcher used a phenomenology qualitative method to engage secondary principals in understanding their leadership and the impact on hands-on strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Themes were analyzed based on the transcribed interview data with NVIVO to describe the meaning of the secondary principals and their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview quotes are included in the upcoming discussion as well as previous research to describe the essence of the current findings. Interviews were transcribed and the researcher conducted a member check to ensure validity of the transcriptions and impressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The secondary principals were able to ensure validity of their interviews before the researcher coded in NVIVO according to the themes that emerged from the transcriptions (Saldana, 2016).

The researcher used hypothesis coding for this study as an exploratory method in which the research questions provided the *hunches* noted by the researcher. In this practice, as the data are reviewed, the hypothesis driven codes "confirm or disconfirm what was projected, and the process can refine the coding system itself" (Saldana, 2016, p. 165). The application of hypothesis coding defines the causes and explanations within the data. The assertion according to

Weber is that “there is no single right way to do content analysis. Instead, investigators must judge what methods are appropriate for their substantive problems” (Saldana, 2016, p. 173).

Implications

The researcher found that the second research question, which related to how teachers continue this hands-on engagement throughout the school year, was not fully answered. More interviews would need to be conducted with a larger pool of participants to ensure clarity for this question. Regarding best practices, the participants in this study truly felt that they were doing the absolute best job they could, and the commonality that “many nights are long nights,” causing the researcher to realize the following: time is not always on the secondary principal’s side; developing an understanding of the differences between being an administrative versus an instructional leader is imperative; and consistency in training and monitoring teachers is a developmental need. Secondary principals need support and resources to effectively manage the dual roles to best serve their schools (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Steyn, 2015).

Recommendations for Future Research

This researcher noted with the participants that affluent schools tend to focus on principals mentoring their assistant principals and then having those assistant mentor the teachers simply because of the demands of the size of the school. Small schools and large urban schools operate in completely different ways and with different expectations. The researcher feels that more investigation and research should be conducted around this phenomenon. Another element that was concerning was how to structure special education for active hands-on engagement. This is a larger issue for observation, and developing consistency in research-based strategies is key. Another component is the struggle of ESL and newcomer students, specifically for teacher and principal mentorship. She also noted how much higher the need is for students who have stable home lives, and how this is something all schools must navigate.

Summary/Conclusion

Large versus small school districts operate completely differently. Secondary principals are managing the tension of establishing a balance between the administrative needs of the school and instructional leadership. The participants all agreed that hands-on engagement is imperative but admitted that they do struggle with how to maintain momentum after school starts because of how demanding the schedule becomes. The goal of administration is to engage teachers into developing best practices, and overall, the best method of structuring this is through the secondary principal's leadership. Michael iterated the concept best: "We all have something to learn. We can all grow and improve and learn . . . from sharing with each other."