

2015

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Recommended Citation

Vaughn, Vance and Oliveras-Ortiz, Yanira (2015) "Considering an Overhaul to the New Principal Preparation Program," *School Leadership Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol10/iss1/3>

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Considering an Overhaul to the New Principal Preparation Program

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Levine (2005) argued that university principal preparation programs for educational leaders are failing to provide a suitable curriculum to prepare aspiring principals to demonstrate the skills and competencies necessary to meet the challenges inherent in the increasingly complex demands of their school leadership roles. Teitel (2006) suggested that colleges and universities offer curricula that are neither coherent nor relevant. According to Candidates, Doctoral Cohort; Coleman, J. Craig; and Alford, Betty J. (2007), it is “a grave disservice [that] is done to university program graduates who enter leadership positions woefully unprepared for the awaiting firestorm” (p. 39).

Colleges and universities have suffered and endured a plethora of criticisms over not properly preparing principals to lead the schools of the 21st century. This powerful statement prompts us to ask what we think are two very important questions. The first question is, what does one mean by “properly preparing?” The second question is, what skills must a principal showcase to lead the schools of the 21st century? This case study research does not directly answer these two questions; nevertheless, the questions are at the heart of this research. This study does, however, illuminate the voices of principals and teachers currently practicing on campuses that fell into “Improvement Required” under the Texas accountability system. The results of this study suggests that regardless of college or university training, principals must have knowledge of the Texas accountability system and provide the means whereby teachers are maximizing student learning and student progress towards being college ready after high school graduation. The purpose of this study is to share with college and university professors the language principals and teachers are using immediately before their campus falls into “Improvement Required.” From these dialogues and conversations, colleges and universities can decipher what training and education is vitally important to successful principal preparation.

Without a doubt, disagreement can easily come to consensus that principals must be armed with the necessary qualities and skill set deemed appropriate to lead and manage in this highly complex, complicated and demanding position. Moreover, we think we know, according to research what these qualities and skill set should look like (Edmonds, 1976; Darling-Hammonds, 2006, Sherman & Jones, 2014). The answer to the quandary, however, might rest in connecting the shifting of the roles and responsibilities of the principal by laws and statutes, and the theoretical framework that has sketched the

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principal as “instructional leader.” In Edmonds (1976) seminal work, the principal is painted as an instructional leader. Ron Edmonds of Harvard put the term “Effective Schools” on the map with his speech “Some Schools Work and more Can” in 1978. He stated,

We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children who’s schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need, in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

According to Edmonds’ “Effective Schools Checklist,” it’s not rocket science! Sherman and Jones (2014) echo Edmonds in their most recent work. They suggest colleges and universities should prepare principals to be teachers of teachers by engaging them in developmental supervision. Developmental supervision is observing teachers for quality instruction and filling in the missing instructional gaps using principles of learning.

Reyes and Wagstaff (2005), and Candidates, Doctoral Cohort; Coleman, J. Craig; and Alford, Betty J. (2007) offered the following:

Treading their way through the demands of federally mandated accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the maze of politically polarizing issues affecting schools, school leaders will need to be both scholars and practitioners to meet the challenges of school improvement such as closing the achievement gap and raising the academic performance of all students (p. 7).

Understanding that theory is embedded in practice through scholar-practitioner leadership (Jenlink, 2002, 2005, 2006) we offer even a more pragmatic approach to the principalship.

A Practical Focus

Colleges and universities might be altering the way they prepare their future principals. Why? The new Texas accountability system for PreK-12 school campuses and districts is nothing like the old system. In the previous accountability system, schools were rated based on a set of measures that looked at different ethnic groups’ passing rates with no consideration to students academic growth, the schools’ efforts to close the achievement gap, and advanced academic performance. In the new system, the school accountability standards have changed; the system is a complex system based on four indexes that measure student performance in addition to student growth, college readiness, graduation rates, as well as the schools’ efforts to close the achievement gap. In addition to a new accountability system, the new teacher and principal appraisal systems are changing, and finally the internships and practicums are taking on a new look. Considering all the changes being implemented as a result of the demands of the federal government and state initiatives, principals might need a different skill set from the one colleges and universities are currently providing. Principal preparation programs might need to

readjust their course sequence of law, finance, and instructional leadership courses; aspiring principals ought to have the skills needed to successfully manage schools while being instructional leaders under the new accountability system and new teacher and principal evaluation systems. Elaboration on all of these changes added together would be too extensive for this manuscript; therefore, we have chosen to isolate one change in particular, the new Texas accountability system, and discuss the necessary ingredients principal preparation programs might consider including in their training of principals.

The New Texas Accountability System

“School accountability – the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures – is increasing around the world” (Figlio & Loeb, 2011, p. 384). In the United States, it has become prevalent that “whatever could not be measured did not count” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 21), particularly since the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Texas politicians and educators are no strangers to accountability based on student performance. Some claim that the NCLB Act was modeled after the Texas accountability system (TEA, 2015). While the state implemented its first testing program in the early 1980s, it was in the late 1980s when the 71st Texas Legislature established the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) (TEA, 2013). The state’s accountability system slightly changed throughout the years with the most noticeable, radical changes occurring in the 2012-2013 school year with the implementation of the new accountability system. The new Texas accountability system is uniquely designed, somewhat complicated and sometimes difficult for principals, campus leaders and teachers to decipher. The intent propping and supporting the new accountability system is the notion that “no child will be left behind.” To this end, every child on the school campus who takes a State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and/or End of Course (EOC) exam will help determine the different ratings for each campus, but unlike previous systems, passing the state assessment is not the only and main indicator of a school’s performance. Students’ academic performance is part of the index-based accountability system and so are the students’ growth in reading and mathematics, the students’ ability to perform at advanced levels, the schools’ efforts to close the achievement gap with a focus on economically disadvantaged students and different ethnic groups as well as high school graduation and the type of high school diplomas students are earning. Thus, aspiring school administrators, current administrators and teachers must grasp the intent of the new system, and align their instruction and professional development in such a way that they are maximizing student academic achievement at the correct level of rigor, and are addressing individual student progress and growth.

The focus in the new accountability system has changed drastically. Principals and teachers are having to change their vocabulary when discussing the new system, as well as alter their thinking about particular groups of students and overall passing rates. The focus now is on all students individually in all areas of the core curriculum, progressing academically and making preparation to be college ready after graduation. According to

Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Seizer, and Wood (2004) “public schools need a very different tool kit for the problems we face” (p. 65).

Accountability and Reconstitution

A significant change in the accountability system is the consequences faced by principals of schools who fail to meet the accountability system’s targets. Although school reconstitution was a part of the old accountability system, school principals had a longer period of time to turn their schools around when their schools failed to meet the state’s accountability standards. In the new accountability system, there is a sense of urgency that was not part of the previous systems. Schools who fail to meet the standards could face reconstitution after two years of substandard performance; a component of the accountability system that school administrators must fully understand to successfully avoid.

Of deeper importance is the assurance that principals and teachers who are in “improvement required” schools for two consecutive years will face severe sanctions. In 2014 accountability system, a school that failed to meet at least one of the set targets of the four accountability indexes was rated as an “improved required” school. While the 2015 accountability system is still under development, one thing is for certain, the targets, standards, and the details within each index of the accountability change will change. Given the changes and the consequences linked to the accountability system, it is the principal’s responsibility to stay informed to avoid becoming an “improvement required” school. Thus, accountability takes on an even greater role. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.) defines accountability in ethics and governance as answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account giving. In other words, someone has to be held responsible for “that thing” or “that mistake” or, in education of students, “the failures.” The “blame-game” is not a new phenomenon. Unfortunately, under this new accountability system the campus principal is the first in line to be held accountable for students’ poor academic performance. Under the new accountability system principals whose campuses falls into improvement required for two consecutive years shall be removed from the campus in that capacity (TEA, 2008).

In addition, campuses that fall into improvement required for two consecutive years must face reconstitution. Reconstitution occurs when the principal, and all instructional staff is removed from the campus while the campus reconstructs the professional staff, the curriculum design, the processes and structures and the academic focus (TEA, 2008).

Given the severe consequences school principals face if the school falls into improvement required, current and aspiring school administrators must have a deeper understanding of the new accountability system and be skilled in the use of the data to guide their decisions. School principals must understand not only the structure of the accountability system but also how to utilize data to continuously monitor student performance and growth. The new accountability system provides school leaders and teachers with data

and a growth measure system that can be utilized to set goals for the individual students, a practice that research has shown can positively impact student commitment, motivation and learning (Schunk, 2009; Stronge & Grant, 2013). The accountability system is no longer about passing or failing the state tests but rather about holding teachers and administrators accountable for students' growth, which is a significant shift from the previous system. School principals must recognize the implications of the new accountability system and the impact it has on their roles as principals, their schools, and ultimately in the instructional practices being implemented in their classrooms. Hence, it is the responsibility of principal preparation programs to ensure aspiring principals have an understanding of the new accountability system to be better prepare them to tackle the challenges they might face as they enter school administration.

Methods

Marshall and Rossman (1999) claimed over 15 years ago that case study research is significant because case studies illuminate in detail justification for those decisions normally based on conceptual frameworks. Since principal preparation draws from such a strong conceptual foundation, a case study approach was necessary. Johnson and Christensen (2012) later supported that case study research addresses the research questions and/or the real issues.

This case study involved interaction in three school districts over a five-year period. While acting as participant observer one of the researchers worked along side the principals and the teaching staff to bring the schools out of improvement required and into an acceptable rating under the state accountability system. Direct observation was also used as a data collection tool. In order to triangulate the data, the researcher conducted interviews in focused groups, and also with individual principals and teachers. This case study was pertinent since this research addressed one descriptive question. The research question was, what are principals and teachers saying and doing on campuses that make them fall into improvement required? A phenomenon within its real-world context, this case study method allowed the researchers to collect data in a natural setting.

Results

The research question was, what are principals and teachers saying and doing on campuses that make them fall into improvement required? Data for this question were captured during teacher and principal interviews, and through direct conversations. On all three campuses the issues, concerns and conversations were the same. The commonalities were "not being aware of" the new accountability system, "not understanding my role" as a teacher, and "if I had know about individual student progress" my instructional approach would not have been the same. On all campuses the Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS) was the only instrument used to determine if teachers were teaching the curriculum.

When asked what data were collected from instruction to assure student gains, one teacher stated, “We did not concentrate on individual student progress because we were still looking at overall benchmark scores. I know I was.” Another stated, “no one stressed indexes to us as far as I know, so it [individual gains] wasn’t a major concern to me.” Two teachers boldly stated accountability was not a concern for the campus because the campus had never experienced academic failure before, and the fact that they were even in improvement required was a “*shock*” to many. One teacher stated, “We can not believe this is happening, and I am embarrassed about the whole thing.” Another teacher chimed, “This is unbelievable, it’s like we are teaching at a failing school, and had we known what would have gotten us here, I’m sure we would have worked on it. We are all surprised.”

One principal stated, “We just got caught this year because some of our teachers had a bad year, and our students did not work hard enough. I am sure it will straighten out this next year.” The same principal shared, “I did not observe teachers other than their normal PDAS observation because these teachers are professionals and they usually do a good job with their students.” Still a different principal stated,

My plate is full every day with meetings, discipline, putting out fires and managing the daily operations that it is almost impossible for me to handle instruction. Besides, we hire teachers to teach and that’s what we expect them to do.

These types of statements were common and repeated throughout the data, year after year, from teachers and principals on all three campuses. From these statements we share the following implications and offer the following recommendations for principal preparation programs.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications and recommendations are many and are of utmost importance. The urgency is necessary simply because principals are being moved from their respective campuses. Three recommendations include: 1) providing our graduate students, the future school administrators of Texas, with current knowledge of the state accountability system, 2) ensuring that aspiring principals leave educational leadership programs with the knowledge and skill set deemed appropriate for practical, successful “nuts and bolts” leadership, training promising principals to collect, analyze and use data to drive instructional decisions, and 3) equipping potential principals with the skills to understand, feel comfortable with and direct curriculum, instruction and assessment on their campuses, thereby improving student achievement collectively and individually.

Recommendation No. 1. Provide educational leadership students with current knowledge of the state accountability system. From the data, it is clear that neither principals nor teachers have a commanding hold and understanding of the accountability

system. The preparation programs ought to ensure that future school administrators enter school administration with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully tackle the challenges the accountability system presents. Perhaps principal preparation programs could include a section on the state's accountability system with its content. This inclusion ensures graduates would have extensive exposure to the relevance and necessity of understanding how the state accountability system works. The implication for not preparing principals to non-negotiate the importance of the accountability system is to allow the apathy to remain on the campuses.

Recommendation No. 2. Ensure that aspiring principals leave educational leadership programs with the knowledge and skill set deemed appropriate for practical, successful “nuts and bolts” leadership. We are not suggesting educational leadership programs change or reevaluate their current curricula. What we are stressing is to include preparation and opportunities for our graduate students to work on collecting quantitative and qualitative data from classroom instruction, and then use data analysis to inform and make decisions about how best to improve academic learning and growth for students collectively and individually. Principals must know how to engage in walk-throughs, conduct full teacher observations, and provide professional development for teachers who might need growth in instructional techniques. Future principals, who might be taking over schools that have been reconstituted, must be proficient in the use of data and understand the indexes and what is required to successfully meet the individual index targets. Given the short timeline provided by the new accountability system in which reconstitution is required, principals no longer have two or three years to make changes and positively impact their students' performance. Principals must go into their first year as leaders equipped to make changes and effectively lead their schools. One implication of not stressing the importance of strong instructional leadership using data-driven decision-making is that principals might continue to allow managerial responsibilities to dictate their working habits.

Recommendation No. 3. Equip potential principals with the skills to understand, feel comfortable with and direct curriculum, instruction and assessment on their campuses, thereby improving student achievement collectively and individually. Principals must understand that they can and must be strong curriculum, instruction and assessment leaders on their campuses. Although the day-to-day managerial duties are absolutely important, as principals' careers have been decided by these duties, academics and student achievement have become increasingly important to the state. Therefore, preparation programs must stress curriculum, instruction and assessment as part of their strength in design.

Conclusion

The state's demands on the campus principal are too serious to ignore, especially for principal preparation programs. All universities are particular about their programs;

therefore, the question becomes, when should principal preparation programs make their changes? We believe the answer is now.

An initial theoretical perspective about school principals might claim that successful principals are those who perform as “instructional leaders.” Many educational leadership programs have adopted scholar-practitioner programs designed to increase relevancy to school administration as well as cohere with the competencies and realities embedded in the day-to-day campus operations. Perhaps educational leadership preparation programs might need to concentrate on a new design in their program. A design that concentrates heavily on preparing a principal to be fully armed, fit and totally capable of holding off the reconstitution plaque that is hovering over all campuses and districts. Vaughn (2014) asked the following question: What tools are we offering in our educational leadership programs that could help our future leaders counteract the NCLB dilemma? Having first hand experience and training in the Texas Accountability and Intervention System (TAIS) process, the Professional Service Provider (PSP) establishment and educational leadership we are offering an educational leadership program that prepares principals to be curriculum, instruction and assessment leaders of teachers who use best practices and data-driven instructional decisions with individual students.

Understanding the intricacies and nuances of the new accountability system is a vital part of ensuring requirements are being met at each of the levels of evaluation. If practicing principals and teachers do not understand how this new accountability system works, and the impact it has on the principal and possibly the teachers’ current position and careers, they could be in for a huge shock when they are told their campus has fallen into Improvement Required.

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