

## Key Considerations in Developing a School Leadership Program

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### **Abstract**

*School systems throughout the world are struggling with the issue of who will lead public schools today, and in the future. The patriarchal model from the past, when authority was not to be questioned and educational leadership was viewed in a straightforward, one-dimensional perspective, has been replaced by a complicated combination of expectations and pressures. This article outlines preparation and training factors that should be considered by school boards in selecting leadership candidates, and when designing training models for school leadership. Understanding the frustrations and contradictions that exist in the modern school environment makes survival in school leadership a matter of political aptitude, and a function of technical skill. The requirement becomes a search for individuals who can guide their schools in response to local needs while meeting non-local mandates.*

One of the most daunting tasks faced by boards and senior management in public school systems throughout the world is the assignment and training of school leaders. The age-old stereotype of the school principal as a stern, father-knows-best, autocrat who is not to be questioned under any circumstances, has been replaced by a modern-day demand for school leaders who possess a considerable range of skills and characteristics. Today's boards struggle with questions that go beyond the mere educational qualifications of a candidate. Because of the diverse nature of today's school cultures, having the right leader in the right school, at the right time, is critical. Issues of training, timing, and placement must be considered concurrently, instead of being viewed as separate and unrelated factors. Societal attitudes and government policies are often juxtaposed, with the result that school leaders must skillfully manipulate limited opportunities to influence the direction of their schools. This complex mix of considerations, combined with the significant pressures inherent to the job of a principal, makes effective training and the selection of appropriate candidates essential to the success of any leadership training program. The purpose of this article is to identify the factors that necessitate a review of current practices in training programs for school leaders, and to highlight considerations in the design of leadership programs for modern schools.

### **Candidate Shortages and Training Timelines**

The reasons for placing a new principal in a school can be as important as the skills and aptitudes possessed by the successful candidate. With the rapidly approaching retirement of large numbers of principals from the baby boom, many countries are attempting to fill administrative positions that become vacant more rapidly than a suitable pool of replacement candidates can be recruited (Bush, 2011). In Ontario, close to 8000 qualified principals and vice-principals were eligible for retirement by 2005, but only 715 teachers, on average, obtained principals' qualifications each year between 1997 and 2000 (Fink & Brayman, 2006, p. 63). School boards experiencing these shortages have been forced to place candidates in positions of leadership without a clear understanding of the specific ambitions of the individual, and without a clear picture of the needs that are specific to each school. The lack of an effective succession plan often results in new principals being placed in situations that are poorly matched to their existing skill set, without the nurturing, consistent development of strengths that comes from a well-planned training scheme (Fink & Brayman, 2006). The effects are

substantial, with frequent turnover of principals resulting in significant barriers to educational change in schools.

### **Leadership in an Ambiguous World – Beyond the Acquisition of Skills**

Effective leadership development depends on changing the candidates' mental models instead of focusing solely on the new administrators' acquisition of knowledge. New principals often enter the profession with misconceptions regarding the responsibilities that will face them, and misunderstandings in regard to the power that they possess to affect change and make decisions (Boerema, 2011). A principal's job is complicated by competing demands and high expectations from many sources, and carefully planned agendas are often disrupted by frequent interruptions, confusing situations with ambiguous solutions, and unclear information from superiors (Lortie, 2009). Many candidates become successful in their teaching careers by being organized and meticulous, often following straightforward paths to solving problems in the classroom. Administrative trainees do not realize, until they become principals, that most administrative decisions are only partly correct (Lortie, 2009). To prepare for the ambiguous aspects of school management, new principals need sufficient time to renegotiate their identities and to reflect on personal experiences within the working groups with whom they share responsibilities.

Designing a training program for aspiring principals must go beyond the mere acquisition of skills. The National Aspiring Principals Pilot (NAPP), introduced by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand in 2008-2009, provided a forum through which aspirants participated in projects designed around self-reflection and inquiry, combined with opportunities for action-research in cooperation with other aspiring principals (Piggot-Irvine, 2011). Follow-up interviews were conducted with NAPP candidates, in which participants expressed opinions of the program as a positive opportunity for evidence-based inquiry and self-directed learning. However, the aspirants expressed concern regarding unclear expectations and short project timeframes, combined with poor support, at times, on the part of principals. If self-directed leadership projects are to be effective, participants must be provided with clear and practical research guidelines, flexible timelines, and strong support from experienced administrators. The subjective process of self-reflection through projects can be rewarding for leadership candidates, but only within a framework of clearly communicated expectations and realistic opportunities to explore project objectives.

### **Beyond Knowledge – The Ability to Establish Relationships**

Programs designed around self-inquiry and project-based research require more time than the traditional imparting of knowledge around school procedures and policies, a possible reason that project-based training programs are often fast tracked before aspirants feel that they have completely explored the ideas presented for study (Wood, 2011). Leadership candidates do not always have enough time to embrace the ideas central to leadership projects because researchers, responsible for project design, underestimate the knowledge required to fulfill the role of a principal (Timperley, 2011). In other words, the problem often exists within the parameters presented for the program, instead of a lack of skill or will on the part of the participants. Content-based knowledge is mistakenly assumed to be the measure by which school leaders are deemed effective, at the expense of the knowledge of pedagogy and relationship development (Epstein et al., 2011). However, a principal's management style has a greater positive effect on student performance when the principal is knowledgeable in regard to teaching and learning, instead of possessing expertise in a specific content area (Timperley, 2011). Pedagogical knowledge, combined with expertise in the use of data, provides an environment where organizational learning theory effectively meets socio-cultural learning theory (Epstein et al., 2011). Therefore, the framework for principal training should create a

standard whereby policy and practice can be combined with theory to effectively use data within the context of learning relationships, provided that the knowledge is up to date and relevant.

### **Political Awareness and Mentorship Design**

Another key consideration in the training and placement of school administrators is the context of the political environment in which the principal must work (Brewer, 2011). There is a continuing assumption that schools operate outside of the sphere of political interference, in spite of evidence from the 1970s, 1980s, and the new millennium, showing significant political influences, sometimes in contradiction to society's expectations of schools. Training programs delivered in the context of static models, whereby the standards and policies are seen as never changing, result in aspiring leadership candidates being unprepared for the fluidity of the system, sacrificing the experimental attitude that is crucial to school innovation and staff development. For example, new principals, eager to initiate professional learning groups in schools, often find their efforts stalled by government mandated reforms, such as standardized assessments, that interfere with the autonomy necessary for locally driven improvement in the school (Fink & Brayman, 2011). Therefore, school boards must be careful to ensure that new administrators have enough time and resources to pursue professional improvement in schools, while also fulfilling the mandates that are passed down from political sources.

An awareness of changes in political realities over time may also affect leadership training in regard to the wisdom that is handed down from one generation to another. Leadership candidates in programs with a mentorship component may become too dependent on their mentors, possibly stifling innovative leadership practice (Bush, 2011). For example, individual mentors who lead within the context of an earlier decade, during which they developed their own leadership personalities, may not provide adequate guidance for a candidate who is aspiring to lead a school in the new millennium, when expectations and policy structures are rapidly changing. A mentorship model that uses a variety of experienced principals, who are at varied stages of their careers, is more effective (Fink & Brayman, 2006). New administrators rely heavily on feedback from colleagues, and may be sensitive to commentaries on their performance from mentors, and from the staff in the schools where the candidates take on a leadership role for the first time (Lortie, 2009). Widely varied consultations with experienced leaders, as well as opportunities to establish a wide range of support networks result in a breadth of knowledge that underlies the confidence needed to succeed (Boerema, 2011).

### **Placement Decisions – Scanning School Landscapes**

The assumption that there is one management style that works better than all others is not useful in an age when schools are populated by diverse groups of staff and students who possess wide ranges of aptitudes, aspirations, and backgrounds (Lortie, 2011). Effective school management differs in accordance with the type of student, and with the predominant type of program offered (Hofman & Hofman, 2011). Academic, or higher performing students, achieve better test results in schools where the management structure has been developed through a consensus between the principal and staff; in contrast to lower performing students, who achieve better test scores in schools where administrators have followed a more rigid management style, with less dependence on consensus and more reliance on a specific set of standards for teaching and learning. Providing the time to acquire knowledge regarding the specific character of the school, as it relates to the needs of the students, is crucial to the principal's acceptance as an insider, if the principal hopes to exert significant influence over staff development and student performance (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Effective placements for new principals are dependent on the candidate's knowledge of the circumstances under which they will be attempting to implement school improvement measures, with the type of student central to the core of values by which a school, or program, is managed.

A new principal's influence within a school's culture may also be influenced by circumstances that occurred long before a candidate has assumed a leadership role. Significant pressures exerted by groups who enjoyed influence under a previous principal's tenure may disrupt early plans by a new principal to affect change (Wood, 2011). In comparison, principals who are promoted from within a school's ranks often face accusations of allowing undue influence on the part of groups with whom the new principal had a prior association, such as specific grade groups or faculties (Meyer et al., 2011). Awareness of the professional hazards of engaging in favouritism, consciously or unconsciously, may help a new administrator to avoid situations that may taint the principal's tenure for many years, making progress difficult to achieve (Bush, 2011). Boards and senior administrators may ensure the success of new school leaders by providing opportunities for candidates to receive realistic information regarding the political situation in the school where the principal is assigned, and the necessary training to manage complex relationships.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important that school boards develop effective training programs for new and aspiring principals, if succession planning is to be successful. The accelerated rate at which experienced principals are retiring requires that training programs for new administrators be developed, and delivered, as soon as possible. However, ensuring that new administrators acquire only basic management skills will not provide the necessary background for administrative candidates to survive professionally in the fast-paced environment of modern, public schools. Training models must allow a gradual shift in knowledge and attitudes, causing new administrators to be developed, not created. Candidates need opportunities to engage in self-reflection and professional development, with clear guidelines and expectations regarding professional learning groups being central to any training program. Mentoring programs should be designed with several mentors in mind for each aspirant, providing opportunities to investigate various ideas in numerous schools of differing characteristics. In addition, potential administrators will need to develop skills and aptitudes with school politics in mind, if they are to thrive within the school communities in which they have been chosen to lead. The training that is provided could be one of the most important investments made by a school board, directly affecting the ability to provide the school leaders that students deserve.

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