The Professional Development Needs of Rural High School Principals:
A Seven-state Study

Pamela S. Salazar
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The increased emphasis on standards-based school accountability since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is focusing critical attention on the professional development of school principals and their ability to meet the challenges of improving student outcomes. While rural school districts are dealing with many of the same issues facing urban districts, there are unique challenges that rural school principals face. However, effective professional development that addresses the unique needs of rural school leaders can build essential leadership capacity that supports school success. This article discusses the results of a study on the professional development needs of rural high school principals for school improvement. These findings provide direction for the development of professional development activities that will enhance the leadership skills that principals need to guide school reform and reach higher standards of student achievement.

According to the document, *Preparing School Principals: A National Perspective on Policy and Program Innovations* (Hale & Moorman, 2003), in order for school reform efforts to be successful, strong leadership must prevail. In light of continued state and federal emphasis on school reform and accountability, numerous researchers link school improvement to the leadership abilities of principals (Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 1991; Hale & Moorman, 2003). As school improvement and school reform have moved to the forefront of our nation's educational agenda, particular attention has been directed to low-performing schools and districts, many of which are in rural communities (Carter, 1999; Reeves, 2003). For this reason, there is increased concern that rural principals lack the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective instructional leaders (Manges & Wilcox, 1997).

As we move into the new millennium, education is facing many challenges. Sava and Koerner (1998) contended that if these challenges are to be met, every school in the nation must be led by an effective instructional and administrative leader. According to a report by the National Staff Development Council, *Learning to Lead, Learning to Learn* (NSDC, 2000), "Improving the quality of America's school leaders is the most feasible way to make a significant difference in American education. . . . Without a sustained focus on improving the quality of school leadership, this nation's reform efforts will falter (p. 15)."

In this atmosphere of education reform, there is a search for ways to improve school performance for our nation's students. According to Tirozzi (2000), reforming educational practice and realizing student achievement gains will require enlightened leadership. However, Elmore (2002) argued that many school leaders do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage standards-based school reform. Hausman, Crow and Sperry (2000) concurred and stated that for education reform efforts to be successfully implemented educational leadership must be strengthened and professional development for principals must be restructured.

America's public schools both need and deserve high-quality educational leadership. At a time when the public is demanding accountability and research has shown that the quality of the leadership demonstrated by the principal has a major impact on the overall effectiveness of schools, there has been a lack of

focused attention on examining how people become school leaders or how they are supported once they assume these roles (Milstein, 1993; Hallinger & Murphy, 1991). Of the limited work that has been done, most addressed the needs of suburban and urban principals with very few addressing the special needs of rural principals (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005).

Rural School Leaders

As educational reform throughout the nation continues, educational leaders will have to play a major role if such reform is to be successful. This places the principal at the center of these school improvement efforts at each school where the principal is central to a school's success and to students' learning (Deal & Peterson, 2000). Though all public schools have much in common with the many challenges of NCLB, there are differences in the issues that rural principals face due to their geographic isolation (Howley, Chadwick, & Howley, 2002). For example, the need to attract and retain highly qualified teachers is especially challenging for rural school principals. Considering the significant link between teacher quality and student achievement and therefore school improvement, the need for specific and unique professional development for rural school principals becomes more pronounced. Today's rural school principals need opportunities to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the critical instructional leadership behaviors that supports school improvement (IEL, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

Today's school principals need to grow and learn throughout their careers to adapt to the changing needs of students and schools (Educational Research Service Report, 1999). The technical, conceptual and people skills demanded of educational leaders have increased dramatically over the last decade. With the widespread acceptance of the need for schools to improve, it is impossible to ignore the critical needs of school leaders to be more effective at their work. They must receive professional development aimed at helping them be more effective, knowledgeable and qualified to facilitate continuous improvement. In the words of the Blue Ribbon Consortium on

Renewing Education (1998): "If we could do only one thing to build school capacity, we would develop a cadre of leaders who understand the challenges of school improvement (p. 35)."

In the seven states of the Northwest Regional Accreditation Association, annual accreditation of schools now requires a comprehensive school improvement process. However, many principals are ill-prepared to lead their schools through extensive self-study and school accreditation renewal. Additionally, there has not been a needs assessment of the professional development needs of the principals regarding their perceptions of the skills needed to facilitate a comprehensive school improvement initiative.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the professional development needs of high school principals to lead school improvement. The data drawn from this study provides universities and school districts a better perspective of the elements that constitute an effective professional development program. In particular, the results of this study provide valuable information to the Center for Outreach in School Leadership Development at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas as it develops professional development modules for rural school principals in the western United States.

Practicing principals who are charged with improving their schools are the group which are most familiar with the continual and changing demands placed on them. According to Buckley (1985), "It is very useful to discuss with participants not only 'what' they wish to learn during their training, but also 'how' they would wish to learn it." He further stated, "Such mature and experienced adults often have clear views on their leadership needs (p.30)." What follows are the perceptions of rural school principals and their perceptions of professional development needs to lead school improvement. In addition, this study determined what types of professional development delivery models principals preferred.

Method

Data were collected from high school principals in the states served by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) accreditation agency. Public high schools in these states are required to be accredited through NASC. These states are Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. These states were chosen due to their membership in the NASC, which requires schools to be engaged in continuous school improvement focused on student performance and to establish the needs of high school principals in western states where there are great numbers of rural schools.

In order to determine what professional development learning opportunities were needed, a needs assessment was conducted utilizing a survey. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) observed that data gathered from needs assessments illustrates the gaps or discrepancies in knowledge and skills in the respondents. The questionnaire entitled the Principal Professional Development Needs Assessment (PPDNA) was designed to obtain information concerning a principal's self-perception of his or her need (or lack of) for professional development in the leadership skills/competencies to facilitate a comprehensive school improvement process as well as a preferred delivery model for the professional development.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards and the competencies described in the 21 job performance domains developed by the National Policy Board on Educational Administration (1990) were used in conjunction with current research to identify the leadership domains which are viewed as critical for success in the principalship. Additional items were added and designed from information taken from the *Analysis of Developmental Needs* and the *21st Century School Administrator Skills Self-Assessment for Instructional Leaders* published by the National Secondary School Principals (1986; 2000), the *Metropolitan Principal Preparation Survey* from Minneapolis Public Schools (1998) and the *Identifying the Needs of Middle School Principals Survey* by Ricciardi (1999). Research on quality professional development programs served as the foundation for the questions regarding preferred delivery model for the professional development.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographic professional profile, leadership performance domains and the preferred delivery model for professional development. In the first section, information about the independent variables pertaining to the participants' demographic characteristics was elicited. The second section consisted of 25 items which asked participants to rate their perceived level of professional development need in each leadership performance domain using four-point Likert-type scales (1=Not a Need to 4=Extremely Important Need). A higher rating indicated a greater perceived level of development need in each of the school improvement leadership areas. On the third part of the questionnaire respondents were asked to rate their preference for each of eight professional delivery models using four-point Likert-type scales (1=Not Likely to Participate In to 4=Very Likely to Participate In). A free-response and comment section provided an opportunity for respondents to add any additional information.

Prior to the administration of the survey, the survey was reviewed and critiqued by a representative group of high school principals who were not included in the research population. Revisions were made based on their feedback. Following the pilot, a panel of experts from both NASSP and researchers in the field reviewed the instrument and commented on the adequacy of content for the intended purpose of the instrument, user-friendliness and other questions concerning content validity. Modifications were based on their recommendations. Finally, a field test was conducted at the 2001 NASSP conference in Phoenix, Arizona to check for format, clarity, the adequacy of content, and other questions concerning face validity. After revisions, a pilot study was conducted and Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for part two of the instrument and found to be .84.

All 623 principals listed in the membership directory of NASC were mailed the *Profile of Principal Professional Development Needs for Accreditation* (PPDNA) survey. Two weeks later, follow-up postcards were sent to 408 individuals who had not returned the survey. A minimum of 50% return rate (312 responses) was established to ensure the validity of the study. Of the 623 questionnaires mailed, 316 were returned (51%). According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size of 240 would be required to be representative of a population fro this size. The response rate of this study exceeded the minimums set by National Education Association (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Of the 316 returned surveys, 17 principals responded online to the website and the remaining 299 principals returned the survey by mail. Surveys were coded to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Principals who participated in the study self-reported on a number of questions in Part I of the questionnaire regarding demographic information about themselves and the schools in which they worked.

School Characteristics

Principals indicated the type of school that they worked in. Approximately 27% of principals indicated they worked in schools with less than 500 students; 20% indicated their school size to be less than 1000 students. The remainder for the principals worked in schools over 1000 students. Sixty-one percent% of the principals self-reported they worked in rural schools while 39% of the principals reported they worked in urban schools.

Table 1

School Characteristics

ITEM	NUMBER	PERCENT
SCHOOL	N	%
0-199	28	8.9
200-499	59	18.8
500-999	62	19.8
1000-1999	121	38.6
2000-2999	36	11.4
3000+	8	2.5
SCHOOL LOCATION	N	%
Urban	122	38.8
Rural	192	61.2
FREE LUNCH	N	%
0-25%	172	54.4
26-50%	112	35.4
51-75%	26	8.2
76-100%	6	1.9
MINORITY STUDENTS	N	%
0-25%	246	77.8
26-50%	56	17.7
51-75%	8	2.5
76-100%	6	1.9

Characteristics of the Principals in Rural Schools

The principals were predominantly male (70%). Over 90% were forty years or older with nearly 55% over fifty years of age.

In addition, nearly 90% of the principals were Caucasian followed by 4.8% African American and 3.1% American Indian/Alaska Native.

Table 2

Personal Characteristics of Rural Principals

ITEM	NUMBER	PERCENT
GENDER	N	%
Male	135	70.3
Female	57	29.7
Totals	192	100.0
AGE	N	%
Under 40	4	1.9
40-49	75	38.6
50-59	106	55.7
60+	7	3.8
Totals	192	100.0
ETHNICITY	N	%
American Indian/Alaska	6	3.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	1.0
African American	9	4.8
Caucasian	171	89.0
Hispanic	4	2.1
Totals	192	100.0

Table 3

Professional Characteristics of Rural Principals

ITEM	NUMBER	PERCENT
HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED	N	%
Masters degree	136	70.8
Ed Specialist	32	16.7
Doctorate	24	12.5
YEARS AS ADMINISTRATOR	N	%
0-10 years	82	42.6
11-20 years	81	42.1
20+ years	29	15.3
AT CURRENT SCHOOL	N	%
0-10 years	176	91.7
11-20 years	16	8.3
20+ years	0	0.0

Participants reported the highest level of formal training that they had earned in preparation for the principalship. Approximately 71% of the principals had earned a Masters degree, which is generally the minimum state requirement for administrative certification. Seventeen percent of the principals held an educational specialist degree and 12.0% held a doctorate. Data collected about years of experience as an administrator revealed that principals participating in the study ranged from being brand new principals to having more than twenty years of experience. Approximately 43.0% of the principals had less than ten years of experience in administration. Another 42% had between ten and twenty years of experience in administration and 15% of the principals reported that they had over twenty years of experience in administration. Principals also reported the number of years as principal of their current school. Approximately 92% of the principals had been at their current school as principal for ten years or less. Only 8% of the principals had been at their current assignment as principal for more than ten years.

Findings of Professional Development Needs of Rural School Principals

The results are reported here under two general headings: professional development needs and preferred delivery model of professional development.

What is the perception of principals regarding their professional development needs to lead school improvement?

Table 4

Rank Order Distribution of Professional Development Needs of Rural Principals as Identified as Important

AREA OF FOCUS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Building team commitment	125	65.3
Creating a learning organization	120	62.6
Sustaining and motivating for continuous improvement	114	59.5
Setting instructional direction - results orientation	111	57.8
Communicating effectively	108	56.4
Facilitating the change process	107	55.8
Building shared decision making, collegiality and peer support	106	55.2
Using research and "best practice"	104	54.1
Understanding student development and learning	101	52.8
Facilitating professional development/Development of others	100	52.2
Solving problems and making decisions	98	50.9
Building community and involvement	97	50.6
Building consensus and negotiating effectively	94	49.1
Resolving complex problems	93	48.2
Understanding measurements, evaluation and assessment strategies	91	47.3
Setting goals and determining outcomes	89	46.5
Developing the vision and the mission	87	45.1
Analyzing data	85	44.3
Defining the core values and beliefs of education	84	43.9
Designing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum	84	43.4
Developing information and data collection strategies	82	42.8
Developing and implementing strategic action plans	79	41.4
Developing the school organization using systems thinking	75	39.0
Managing the organization and operational procedures	74	38.4
Organizing resources	68	35.2

Principals identified their most important professional development needs in the areas of:

- Building a Team Commitment
- Creating a Learning Organization
- Sustaining and Motivating for Continuous Improvement
- Setting Instructional Direction – Results Orientation
- Communicating Effectively
- Facilitating the Change Process

The data suggested that principals recognized that professional development in these domains would help them perform their primary duties as instructional leaders and organization developers for continuous school improvement. The areas of (a) Managing the Organization and Operational Procedures and (b) Organizing Resources were identified by principals as areas of least need for professional development. The data suggested that principals are concerned with the skills of leadership as compared to the skills of management. Principals clearly recognized the collaborative nature of school leadership and ranked areas of need for professional development in those areas that would assist them in developing a collaborative learning community.

Is there a preferred delivery model of professional development by the principals?

Table 5

Professional Development Preferred Delivery Model of Rural Principals

Method	Not likely to participate in %	May participate in %	Likely to participate in %	Very likely to participate in %
Workshop	1.5	10.0	51.9	36.6
Online/Self-paced	25.7	36.7	28.4	9.2
Mentoring/Internship/Coaching	13.4	27.3	39.7	19.6
University Coursework	18.1	38.5	33.6	9.8
Problem-based projects	14.1	40.2	36.8	8.9
Small study group	11.4	27.7	42.1	18.8
Hands-on/Field-based	6.6	17.9	40.3	35.2
Seminar/Conference	1.9	11.0	39.2	47.9

Principals identified the delivery model of Conference/Seminar as the most preferred. Other preferred delivery models identified were Workshop and Hands-on/Field-based. There was limited interest in mentoring and coaching experiences, as well as networking through small study groups. The least preferred professional development delivery models were identified as Online/Self-paced and University coursework. These data suggested that principals are concerned with the amount of time away from the demanding responsibilities of their job and when participating in professional development, they want to (1) be held captive, i.e., attend a workshop or a conference for a short period of time and (2) get the information so that they can get back to their schools. The concern with time and the ongoing priorities of leading a school may also have been the reason few principals selected self-paced on-line professional development. This requires a self-modulated, self-paced time commitment. Unlike being held captive in a workshop, this is easy to postpone to some later date that may never happen when more pressing issues arise.

Discussion

The data from this study lend support that rural principals are concerned about the leadership needed for school improvement. They stated they needed more professional development in order to meet the new expectations of their role. A large proportion of the principals perceived that they lacked the skills to build the collaborative learning organization that is so critical to successful school improvement (Gold, 2000). Clearly, principals must be provided quality professional development if schools are going to successfully serve every student.

What is not so clear is the best way to deliver the professional development. Recent research on professional development programs for rural principals suggest that technology may be a potential solution for providing professional development to administrators in geographically isolated schools, but questions remain about the effectiveness of

this type of training (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). However, the principals surveyed found this the least beneficial to them. It is also important to note that there is extensive literature on the value of administrative mentoring (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Chadwick & Howley, 2002), yet there was not a clear consensus from the principals that they found this to be a valuable means to improve their skills. Moreover, they did not see the importance of networking through small study groups as a way to reduce isolation. This suggests that more research needs to be conducted to better understand which delivery models are most effective for professional development of rural principals.

Good leadership is not innate (Fullan, 2001). The main leadership forces facing principals today are organizational. Leaders must be able to establish expectations on the norms of teaching and learning for all members of the learning community while building organizational systems to support them and maintaining a professional climate that encourages practitioners to continue to learn. Leadership today requires the ability to mobilize constituents to do important but difficult work under conditions of constant change, overload, and fragmentation. This requires ongoing professional development opportunities to help principals update their leadership knowledge and skills on a continuing basis.

Summary

The results of this research study on the professional development needs of rural high school principals to lead school improvement suggests that principals have strong preferences for activities that will help them create and sustain high-performing learning systems that ensure that all students meet high standards. Principals recognized that for effective organizational development and continuous improvement, they must build team commitment in order to create a learning organization. They realized that effective communication is essential to determining instructional direction and motivating for defined results. And, they noted that understanding the change process is essential to

sustaining continuous growth. All of their thoughts and preferences are in alignment with the literature regarding effective instructional leadership practices (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003).

The data drawn from this study provide school districts and state agency professional development providers with a better perspective of the elements that are needed for an effective professional development program for rural high school principals who are leading school improvement efforts within their schools. The leadership performance domains identified for future professional development support the increasing role of the principal in the process of school reform and more specifically the leadership required to facilitate comprehensive school improvement. As knowledge and theory grows in the areas of creating learning organizations, principals need continuous opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Professional development opportunities should be tailored to the needs of the participants and geared to actual leadership roles.

Formal leadership in schools is a complex, multi-faceted task that has evolved over the last decade in response to the demands of educational reform and renewal. In order to move into the 21st century with the necessary leadership to meet the challenges of increased public demands, something must be done to better prepare principals who are more than managers and more than administrators (Murphy, 1992). Effective instructional leaders must be developed and supported with the latest knowledge about what works. Research must be continued to better understand rural schools, rural settings, and the challenges of rural school leadership.

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