Principals' Perceptions of Educational Change: Critical External Agent Support to K-12 Schools

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This research reveals the type of support that is imperative for principals working with external agents in low-performing urban schools as required by federal and state legislation. Nine principals, in four urban districts, two aided by one external agency and seven aided by another, were followed in year-long case studies. Mixed methods for data collection, including interviews, school site visits, professional development evaluations, surveys, and focus groups, were used along with anecdotal material. The results provide insights for school districts, external agents, and principals seeking to maximize the support they receive in response to the urgent need to accelerate and maintain student achievement.

Thousands of schools and districts in the U.S. are faced with the task of rapidly raising student achievement, particularly in low socio-economic (SES) communities. Federal legislation (2002), *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), and state school improvement programs have mandated that low-performing schools become accountable through specified measures to increase achievement based on standardized test results. One of these requirements includes contracting the

work of external agents to provide support to the schools and districts. While the targets for student achievement and essential program components are specific, the types of support provided by county offices of education, universities, or private entities vary widely.

This study explores the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding the role of external support providers in bringing about educational change. Faced with the possibility of being transferred, losing their jobs, and/or having their schools "taken-over" by the state, principals have great concern about the effectiveness of the support programs in this climate of high-stakes educational change. Through a year-long case study of principal perceptions, the investigators examined the role and effectiveness of two distinct external support providers within several schools in four large, urban school districts all made up of at least 75% Latino students and at least 60% in poverty.

Conceptual Framework

Public K-12 schools today must provide a quality education for diverse populations of students who often come from backgrounds different from the teachers and administrators, and ensure that each student achieves the standards set by the state and federal governments (Trumbell & Pacheco, 2006). Challenged with rapidly changing demographics, educational critics assert that schools have been unable to meet the needs of the increasing majority of their students. The population of children of color and students living in poverty is growing in the nation's schools.

The percentage of U.S. public school students who are racial or ethnic minorities grew from 22% in 1972 to 42% in 2003, primarily due to growth in Latino enrollments. In 2003, the minority public school enrollment of 54% exceeded the White enrollment of 46% in the West (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Furthermore, in 2005-2006, students of color comprised nearly 70% of the population in California, while over 70% of the teachers were White (California Department of Education, 2006). Additionally, for every 100 students in public schools in California, 23 lived in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Unfortunately, these marginalized children remain significantly below their peers on all measures of academic achievement, including grades, standardized test scores, rates of graduation, and percentages entering college (California Department of Education, 2006) and the gap is continually increasing (Carey, 2004).

As a response to the achievement gap, strict accountability guidelines have been established through state and federal legislation to ensure that low-performing schools and districts improve. In the federal *NCLB* legislation (2002) and state accountability processes, the external support provider is seen as a neutral body that can be effective in gauging obstacles and successes, and can provide "unbiased" information to school and district leaders. In California, county offices have become critical to serving as external support providers. However, professional development institutes connected with universities and even private entities with high fee structures are also garnering an increasing amount of the school support market (California Department of Education, SAIT Presentation, June 2006).

Critical to the success of this support provider model is an understanding of educational change. It is not sufficient to follow state and/or federal mandates infusing data analysis into schools, facilitating collaboration and shared leadership (Lambert, 1998, 2003), and providing training opportunities on standards-based curriculum and instructional strategies. The effectiveness of external support providers is linked to their understanding of change theory.

The long list of failed education reforms has led experts to believe that a mandate for change is far from sufficient to ensure achievement of one's purpose. Many educational reforms are designed by experts outside the schools and have

failed because those in charge of the efforts had little or a distorted understanding of the culture of schools. Successful implementers understand the structure of the organization, sacred traditions, power relationships, and how members define themselves and their roles (Wenger, 2002).

The school culture, like that of any other major social institution, is political. This culture includes the behavior of people (students, teachers, administrators, parents) and the stability and transformations in classroom, school, and school system structures in terms of seeking, allocating, and using power. Introducing, sustaining, and assessing school reforms are political processes, since they ultimately alter or threaten to alter existing power relationships, particularly if a reallocation of resources is involved (Boleman & Deal, 1997; Sarason, 1982).

The literature on educational change emphasizes a need not for superficial first-order changes, but for deeper, second-order changes in the cultures and structures of schools (Cuban, 1990; McKeever, 2003). This effective implementation of innovations requires time, personal interaction and contacts, reflective dialogue, training, and other forms of people-based support. Today's high-stakes accountability movement, however, has principals and teachers working with a sense of urgency and little time to implement deep change (Lambert, 1995).

Educational research has highlighted the importance of personal contact among implementers, and between implementers and consultants, in order for the challenging process of unlearning old roles and learning new ones to occur.

> *…It is not that easy to accomplish fundamental change even with large resources, commitments from a variety of essential partners, and even by focusing on a small number of schools…the hardest core to crack is the learning core – changes in*

instructional practices and in the culture of teaching toward greater collaborative relationships among students, teachers and other potential partners…to restructure is not to "reculture." Changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills and beliefs (Fullan, 1993, p. 49).

Successful change, according to many, is best described by the new science of complexity or chaos theory where the link between cause and effect is non-linear with paradoxes and contradictions. Creative solutions arise out of conditions of uncertainty, diversity, and instability. Self-organization occurs through political interaction and learning in groups (Fullan, 1999; Stacey, 1996; Wheatley, M., 1992, 2002).

Reform must focus on the school as a learning organization--continuously acquiring and using new and better knowledge. Knowledge creation is not simply the acquisition of best practices but rather the ability to generate and learn new ideas (Schechter, 2002). Success is a result of embedded interaction inside and outside the school which converts explicit knowledge (words and numbers shared as hard data) to tacit knowledge (skills and beliefs which are below the level of awareness).

Neither top-down strategies (not addressing tacit knowledge) nor bottom-up strategies (not converting tacit knowledge into usable, shared explicit knowledge) are effective. Crucial is the role of the school principal in this conversion of knowledge, mediating external and internal forces toward purposeful knowledge creation (Fullan, 1999; Singe, 1990).

Method

This study was conducted to examine the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding the role of external support providers in supporting school change. This type of inquiry

is not possible solely through quantitative measures, such as surveys or numerical data analyses. Therefore year-long case studies during the 2004-2005 school year employing mixed methods were utilized (Creswell, 1998; Jaeger, 1998; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003).

Principal surveys and focus group sessions conducted at the end of the school year provided qualitative data for analysis of principals' perceptions of the educational change process utilizing external support providers. Descriptive statistics, t tests for independent groups, and analysis of variance were employed to examine data.

The qualitative portion of the investigation utilized three methods of data collection with the school principals: open-ended responses to the evaluation of each professional development session by the external support providers, individual interviews, and focus group conversations. Principals were interviewed individually at the beginning and end of the program. They were also informally asked at each training session about their needs. Formal interview and focus group data developed into transcriptions and notes from the informal conversations provided clear trends. School site visitations provided background and context. All qualitative data sources were triangulated and analyzed by a team of two researchers for common themes.

Data Sources

These case studies included nine different school principals, in four different Southern California school districts. Two of the schools were served by one external agent, and the seven other schools were served by another. Across all case studies, similar quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. Trends in data gathered from principals across all schools were identified (Creswell 1998; Jaeger 1998; Patton 1990; Yin 2003).

Results

Quantitative Findings

T tests for independent means across 44 survey variables relating to the effectiveness of the work of the support providers showed a significant difference at the .01 level in regard to only one independent variable—the district in which principals worked. This variation in response by district is illuminated by qualitative focus group and interview data and is addressed below.

Qualitative Findings

While quantitative data analysis revealed significant differences among principals in regard to their attitudes toward external support based on school district, focus group and interview data elaborated on these differences and resulted in three common themes across principal responses. They were: principal input and school culture, principal support, and Defined roles for principals and districts.

Principal Input and School Culture. Principals asserted that the external agents needed to design the entire program *with* them so that it would be truly beneficial to their school sites. Many principals expressed a belief that the external support providers often designed professional development and other reform measures without consulting the principal or truly understanding the culture of the school.

> *I can't really say that it [the external support] has been totally supportive. XXX [the external entity] is basically having teachers and administrators attend institutes they provide. The agent worked with the math department first for a year prior to receiving the Comprehensive School Reform grant. The*

math teachers weren't really happy. We tried to have meetings with them to let them know what we wanted. They would come once a month to math and leadership department. meetings, but they didn't really provide what we wanted. We were hoping that the trainer would work on ELD instruction. She touched on it a couple of times, but it didn't amount to much (Administrator, District A).

Several principals shared that the program should be customized in its initial development.

I want someone to come in, to look at our needs, and tailor our program to those needs. There are some things that can be generalized about schools urban environments, but every school has a particular culture because the people there shape that culture. And that particular community shapes that culture and all things don't fit all schools (Administrator, District B).

In a focus group of principals from District B, one principal shared how he attempted to customize the support provided by the external agents.

We brought the XXX support providers to our site to go beyond what we were getting. We wanted to tailor it to our school. When we did that we had impact (Principal, District B).

As their programs progressed, principals felt that they needed to be consulted and serve as partners with the external agents in planning the next steps, changing plans, and identifying new and unexpected resources that might now be needed to further the schools' goals. Several principals shared that their knowledge of the

school culture and community was not always utilized by the external support providers as decisions were made.

> *I want the external entity to provide something that teachers really buy into. If they don't, there will be no transfer into instructional change when they are at the school site* (Administrator, District C).

The more professional development a principal had received, the more he or she expressed a readiness for unique, customized support.

Principal Support. Principals expressed the need for a mentor or coach to provide feedback and support as they attempted to lead the change efforts at the school site. Many principals shared that they wanted the processes modeled and a non-biased "external expert" to help guide the change in school culture and practices.

> *I believe support providers should come in without preconceived notions. Even though the provider has looked at least at our test scores and demographic data. I believe the provider should always be open-minded* (Teacher, District C).

> *So we have all bought… book. And we are going to through a chapter a month and ask how that translates for each grade level. But it would be nice to have a support provider maybe sit in on those monthly meetings and give us suggestions and ideas and to help us implement it. You know it is one thing to get all this information but then again how does that translate into practice? To help just hold our hands so that we can effectively translate it into practice* (Administrator, District C).

Principals in all of the districts were unanimous in their desire for a mentor or a coach—someone to, at the very least, serve as a "sounding board."

Defined Roles for Principals and Districts. Finally, principals experienced confusion and ambivalence about their role in what was designed to be a systemic change effort with the district office. It was a situation in which they were often unsure of the decision-making latitude they had been given to deviate from district-wide policies. Districts B and C had actually contracted with the county support provider for the schools while the schools in districts A and D had selected their own external agents who were university based. The principals in those districts with the most highly centralized authority in the district office were most uncomfortable in making the bold changes needed for high-impact school change.

> *I feel as if I am caught in the middle between what [the external agent] is recommending the school do and what my district will allow us to do. The district assigned the Assistant Superintendent to work with us, but she rarely shows up to the trainings. Every time we request permission to implement x's recommendations, it seems we are stopped by the district* (Administrator, District D).

> *Our district is great; we can do whatever we want at the school level as long as we increase student achievement and abide by the union agreement. It's been hard, though, to bring about a change in culture. I've only been here three years. We've made a lot of changes, but the beliefs of the teachers are strong, and the union prevents us from asking teachers to spend any time after school for*

meetings or trainings. We have to pay for everything. I feel like my hands are often tied (Administrator, District A).

Discussion/Conclusion

It is unequivocal that the principal is the fulcrum upon which changes in teaching and learning at the school site rest (Fullan 2003; Lambert 1998, 2003). As this key figure enters into unstinting relationships with district office staff, school site leaders and staff, parents, and now highly involved external agents, it is essential that principals have both a clear sense of their responsibilities and their authority to make decisions. In turn, external agents must work to ensure that these needs of the principal are fully met.

In looking to further reform efforts, it will be critical to support not only the principals' strategic role, but to do so with a full understanding of the culture and particular context of each school and its district (Argyrols, 1993; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Scion, 1987).

The four study districts, in terms of student achievement and school demographics, were far more similar than different and deeply representative of California's most challenged districts. They were also remarkably consistent in their principals' insistence that they needed the freedom and systemic support to be truly responsive to school culture. Urban education must be recognized as being impervious to cookie cutter models. Such support provider efforts are a burden rather than a boon to urban principals. Further research should focus on savvy, responsive, support for each school, district, and urban teacher leader.

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