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Developing Principals as Racial Equity Leaders: A Mixed Method Study

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Abstract

This article will present information and research on how a college of education is intentionally developing principals to lead with confidence and racial competence. The nation's student achievement research is sobering: our current school systems widen already existing gaps between white students and students of color, (Darling-Hammond, L. 2004, 2009; Wooleyhand, 2003; Haycock & Gerald, 2002; Kafele, 2014). This study reviews data from a mixed method study around the intentional development of principals as critical leverage points to ensuring that meaningful changes occur; so much so that achievement for children of color improves.

Key Words

leadership, racial equity, courageous, achievement gap, principal development

Introduction

Throughout the United States our inability to effectively ensure high levels of learning for all children of all races without exception and without excuse persists.

On national standardized tests in both reading and math, White children have outperformed African American and Hispanic children consistently since 1975, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2012).

That statistic reflects a 36-year trend using just one national measure making the data predictable as well as consistent. To be specific, NAEP (2013) data reports virtually no change or insignificant change in the width of the gap in achievement levels between students of color and White students.

Minnesota Department of Education data (2014) reveals a pattern for predictable racial disparity that mirrors our national pattern. In the last five years, in both math and reading, the data reveals a steady and unchanged racial discrepancy between the achievement levels of White and Black students where White students show results that are approximately 30 percent higher than Black students. Additionally, the data do not suggest that any improvements in these results are on the horizon.

As we write this article, it is safe to say that most states, if not all, demonstrate a pattern of results where the achievement levels for children of color, in general, is predictable, inequitable, and disparaging.

The nation's student achievement research is sobering: our current school systems widen already existing gaps between White

students and students of color, (Darling-Hammond, L. 2004, 2009; Wooleyhand, 2003; Haycock & Gerald, 2002; Kafele, 2014).

We also know that effective principals can, and do, have significant influence in ensuring that meaningful changes occur in schools; so much so that they are able to leverage the most significant and intractable challenge facing schools today—ensuring increased levels of achievement for children of color.

Today, more than ever before, it is critically important that school leaders address issues of inequality in their practice, (Barbara & Krovetz, 2005; Haycock & Jerald, 2002).

Mendels (2012) writes, “A major reason to attend to principal leadership is the emergence of research that points to an empirical link between school leadership and student achievement” (p. 54). Now, more than ever, we are faced with an urgency to change the predictable achievement trajectory for children of color.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) reports, for the first time in our nation's history, “The percentage of students who are White is projected to be less than 50 percent beginning in 2014 and to continue to decline as the enrollment of Hispanics and Asians/Pacific Islanders are expected to increase.” This projection is based on the racial ethnic enrollment trends in public schools from 2001 through fall 2011.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) reports that between fall 2001 and fall 2011, the number of White K-12 students in U.S. public schools decreased from 60 to 52 percent, while the percentage of Black

students in U.S. public schools remained flat. In contrast, the number of Hispanic students enrolled during this period increased from 17 to 24 percent.

If we intend to rupture the cycle of underperforming schools (schools with persistent achievement gaps), we need to examine the link between principal leadership and student achievement.

Further examination of the characteristics for effective principal leaders who demonstrate the ability to impact the academic achievement of students is found in research from The Wallace Foundation. This Foundation has supported more than 70 research reports and other publications on school leadership. A summary of these studies (Wallace Foundation, 2013), identifies five key practices of an effective principal:

- 1) shaping a vision for academic success for all students;
- 2) creating a climate hospitable to education;
- 3) cultivating leadership in others;
- 4) improving instruction;
- 5) managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement (p. 4).

Although the five characteristics emerged from various studies, it is clear that they define key practices of effective principal leadership. So why have we not yet seen the changes in principal practice that research suggests is necessary for improvement?

We contend that the leadership skills needed run deeper than what is already in practice. We believe that understanding race and implementing culturally relevant practices and policies are capacities that will drive more

effective principal leadership, and ultimately ensure better results for children of color.

We agree with Singleton (2006) who writes, "... we have a pronounced need to develop powerful, dynamic, and engaged leaders who are willing to do what is necessary to build an anti-racist/equitable educational system where all students succeed. An effective force of anti-racist leaders can foster real equity transformation in America's schools and districts" (p. 240).

Principals must understand their own racial identity as well as that of their students. School leaders who acquire the needed skills to effectively lead schools with children of many races have an increased chance of effectively changing the achievement pattern that has and continues to harm children in the United States. Principals as racial equity leaders become a key leverage point in impacting the disparaging and racially predictable gap in student achievement.

This article examines the Institute for Courageous Principal Leadership's theory of action, mission, vision, leading strands and research data generated through Minnesota State University, Mankato's College of Education.

The Institute for Courageous Principal Leadership was created as a call to action to support the development of effective principals who demonstrate the practices outlined in the Wallace research (Wallace Foundation, 2013), but who also lead with fearlessness and racial competence to eliminate racial disparities in achievement within their schools.

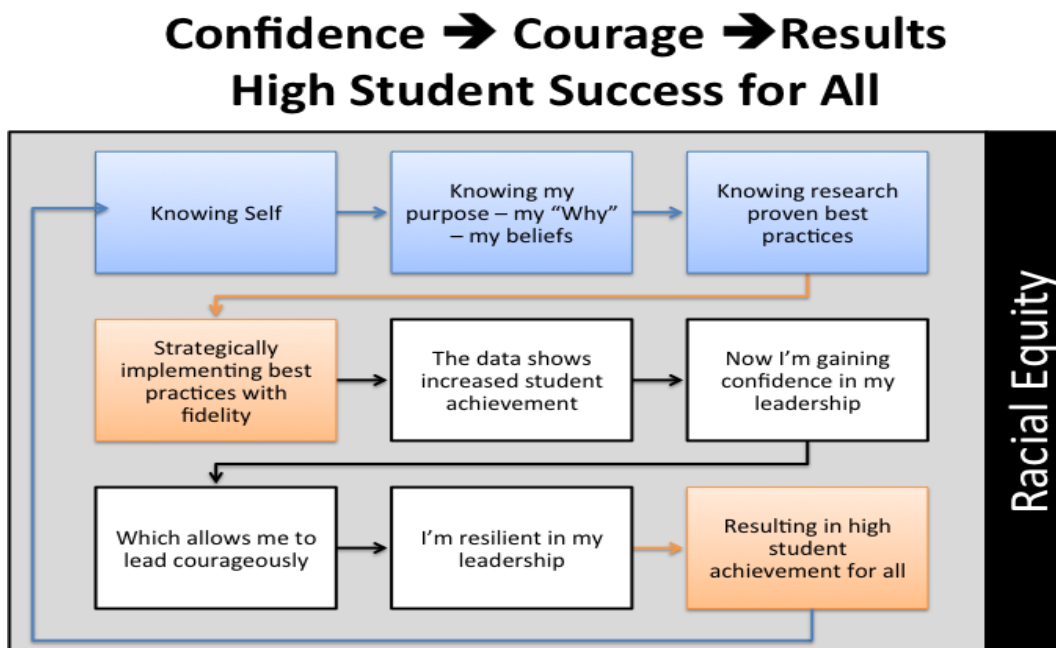
Theory of Action

The Institute's Theory of Action (Figure 1) is based on the well-established school leadership

supposition that building the capacity of school principals to realize compelling missions that ensure high achievement for all students requires the intentional development of principals' confidence and competence (Mitgang, 2012, 2013). Both are advanced through self-conceptualization of leadership

while increasing the knowledge and skills required to implement and monitor best practices. The Institute was founded on the belief that building principal capacity to become accomplished and courageous leaders will, in turn, promote strong and equitable results for all children.

Figure 1. Theory of Action.



(Krull & Raskin, 2013)

The Institute provides a two-year instructional leadership development program. The goals are:

- 1) to increase principals' ability to advance educational equity and eliminate racially-predictable disparities in achievement, learning, teaching, and participation, and
- 2) to build principals' leadership capacity to facilitate, create and sustain

technical and adaptive change that significantly improves achievement for all students.

The Institute transfers theory into practice in the development of instructional leadership by anchoring the participant's learning in nine leading strands:

1. *Equity and Achievement*
Understanding the relationship between race and learning

2. *Political Leadership*
Navigating political directions and staying focused on the right work and on the needs of students
3. *Using Data*
Using data to inform instruction and guide decision making in schools
4. *Developing Self*
Leading through reflection, 360 assessment and a deeper understanding of one's own leadership style
5. *Developing Others*
Strengthening principals' ability to develop others through coaching, mentoring and difficult conversations
6. *High Leverage Leadership Practices*
High-level best practice instruction that leads to increased results
7. *Change Processes*
Initiating, facilitating and sustaining change efforts
8. *Confidence*
Acting with self-assuredness and is authentically aligned with beliefs and convictions
9. *Communication*
Communicating so others will listen, follow, and believe

These nine leading strands align with current research on effective leadership practices (Table 1) and specifically call out racial equity and confidence as added capacities (Wallace Foundation 2013; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, (2007).; Mackey 2006; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005; McGee 2004).

Table 1

Comparison of Researched Effective Leadership Practices to the Institute's Leading Strands

| Researched Effective Leadership Practices | Institute Leading Strands |
|---|--|
| Shaping a vision for academic success for all students | Equity and achievement High Leverage Leadership Practices |
| Creating a climate hospitable to education | High Leverage Leadership Practices Political Leadership Equity and achievement Confidence |
| Cultivating leadership in others | Developing Self Developing Others |
| Improving instruction | Equity and achievement High Leverage Leadership Practices Change Processes Using Data |
| Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement (The Wallace Foundation 2013) | Communication Using Data Change Processes Equity and achievement High Leverage Leadership Practices Confidence |

The Research Study

The purpose of this study was to (a) identify the presence or absence of change in the participant's personal perceptions of his or her own competencies across all nine leading strands for two years after participating in the Institute; (b) reveal how the participant's direct supervisors perceive the change in leadership style and behavior across the nine leading strands; and (c) identify whether a discernable shift was evident in the participant's responses to questions related to their leadership strategy and implementation.

Sample, Data Collection and Data Analysis

A mixed method study was implemented to evaluate the Institute's effectiveness on participants around the nine leading strands.

A quantitative self-assessment survey of participant's skills in each of the nine learning strands was collected over a two-year timeframe of the Institute. The self-assessment survey data was collected at three specific points in time: (a) prior to the participant's

participation in the Institute; (b) one year into participation; and (c) upon completion of the Institute after two years.

Thirty-two principals/school leaders from Minnesota Public Schools participated in the Institute for Engaged Principal Leadership cohort beginning fall of 2012 and ending summer of 2014. Included in the study were twenty-four principals who completed all three surveys. The self-assessment surveys were taken using Qualtrics, an online survey management tool.

An assessment survey measuring the supervisor's perceptions of participant's skills in each learning strand was collected at the conclusion of the Institute with 16 supervisors completing the online assessment.

Questions focused on the presence of behavioral changes in the participant relative to the Institute's nine leading strands. The supervisors' survey examined the same behavioral characteristics identified in the principal's self-assessment (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Image of principal self-assessment survey.

Principal Survey - Institute for Engaged Principal Leadership

|[Welcome Screen]

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to answer our short survey. The purpose of this survey is to get a better understanding of how you view your progress, or lack thereof, since becoming a participant in the Institute Engaged Principal Leadership program.

Your responses will remain completely confidential and will not be shared with your school district; you can be assured findings will only be reported in aggregate.

We ask that you answer the following questions honestly and thoughtfully.

Thank you.

[Page Break]

1. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency around equity, achievement and understanding the relationship between race and learning as...
 - Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

2. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency around developing others through coaching, mentoring and difficult conversations as...
 - Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

3. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency to initiate, facilitate and sustain meaningful change as...
 - Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

4. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency in understanding my leadership strengths and area for growth as...
 - Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

Principal Survey - Institute for Engaged Principal Leadership

5. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency in navigating the politics while staying true to the right work as...
- Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

6. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency in communicating effectively as...
- Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

7. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency in using data to inform instruction and guide decisions...
- Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

8. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of proficiency in implementing high leverage leadership practices that lead to results as...
- Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

9. At this point in the Early Career Principal Institute I would rate my level of confidence as a school leader as...
- Limited Proficiency
 - Moderate Proficiency
 - Proficient
 - Strongly Proficient

[Page Break]

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. Your feedback is appreciated.

[End]

Qualitative interviews with the participants were recorded prior to starting the Institute and again at the conclusion of the Institute. Participants responded to questions about their opinions, intentions, and plans regarding his or her school goals and approach to leadership. Twenty-one principals from Minnesota Public Schools who completed the Institute for Engaged Principal Leadership cohort-ending summer 2014 participated in

both interviews, which were conducted in person and video-taped.

Quantitative Results

Participant's self-assessment of skills shows an increase in all nine leading strands. The leading strands, Understanding Leadership Strengths as well as Race and Equity, reported the largest percentage increases of over 70 percent (Table 2 and Figure 3).

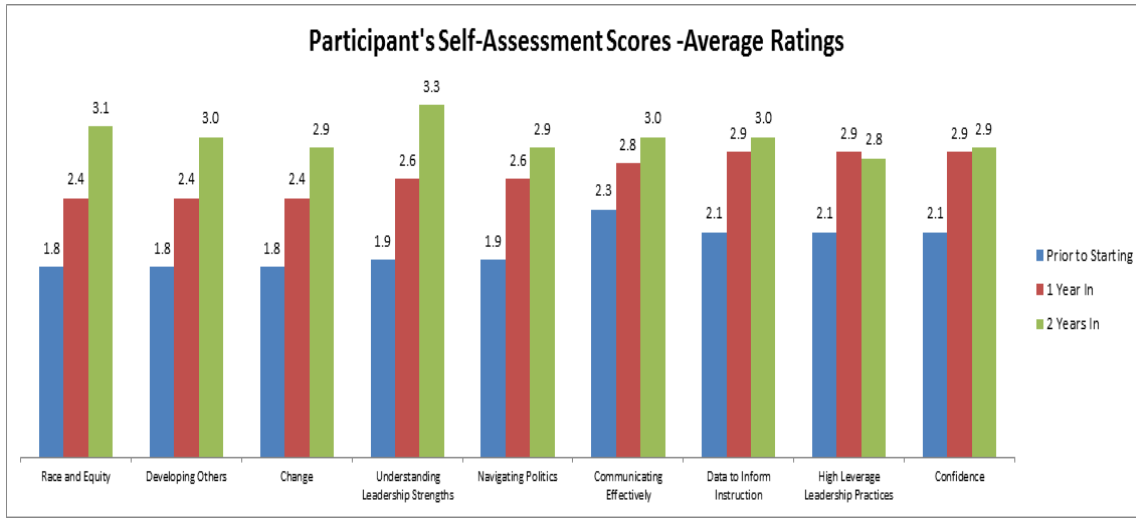
Table 2

Participants' Self-Assessment Scores Beginning to 2 Years Post

| Leading Strands | Student Self-Assessment Prior to Starting | Student Self-Assessment 1 Year In | Student Self-Assessment 2 Years In | % Δ Beginning to 2 Years In |
|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Understanding Leadership Strengths | 1.9 | 2.6 | 3.3 | 78% |
| Race and Equity | 1.8 | 2.4 | 3.1 | 74% |
| Developing Others | 1.8 | 2.4 | 3.0 | 68% |
| Change | 1.8 | 2.4 | 2.9 | 62% |
| Navigating Politics | 1.9 | 2.6 | 2.9 | 57% |
| Data to Inform Instruction | 2.1 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 42% |
| Confidence | 2.1 | 2.9 | 2.9 | 37% |
| High Level Leadership Practices | 2.1 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 33% |
| Communication Effectively | 2.3 | 2.8 | 3.0 | 29% |

**Average Ratings on 4 point scale*

Figure 3. Participant’s Self-Assessment Scores—Average Ratings.



Supervisors’ perceptions of each participant’s leadership change in comparison to participants’ perceptions of her/his

leadership change showed clear alignment, with supervisors also consistently rating participants higher in all nine leading strands (Table 3).

Table 3: Difference Between Participant’s and Supervisor’s Perceptions of Leadership

| Leading Strands | Supervisors’ Score (After 2 Yrs.) | Participants’ Scores (After 2 Yrs.) | % Difference (Supervisor vs. Participant) |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| High Leverage Leadership Practices | 3.3 | 2.8 | 15% |
| Communicating Effectively | 3.5 | 3.0 | 14% |
| Race and Equity | 3.6 | 3.1 | 14% |
| Data to Inform Instruction | 3.4 | 3.0 | 12% |
| Change | 3.0 | 2.9 | 3% |
| Navigating Politics | 3.0 | 2.9 | 3% |
| Confidence | 3.0 | 2.9 | 3% |
| Developing Others | 3.1 | 3.0 | 3% |
| Understanding Leadership Strengths | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3% |

*Average Rating on 4 point scale

Qualitative Analysis

Due to the high volume of qualitative data and the highly detailed responses, the researchers outsourced the coding of the qualitative data to ADAPT Inc., a research processing company, which specializes in qualitative analysis via open-ended coding.

ADAPT, Inc. describes the process used to code the qualitative data from this study in the following manner: “Due to the highly specific responses, one of our most detailed and experienced comment coders was selected to code this data.

The coder carefully read each individual response and then created a taxonomy of responses based on two or more mentions of a related idea. Ideas similar in nature were then grouped into “Nets” to consolidate the data so that the end user could more easily analyze the data.

Another experienced comment coder reviewed the lists for accuracy and clarity of wording/meaning and then reviewed 10 percent of the coding” (M. Wells, personal communication, July 8, 2014).

Qualitative Results

After attending the Institute, there was a discernable shift in how participants thought about, and implemented, their leadership goals, and how they responded to strategic leadership questions. This was evident in the language content participants used in the Post-Institute interviews. Specifically, the following three transformations were reflected in the data.

Staff to student focused language

Participants’ language shifted from staff-focused to student-focused after taking part in the Institute. In the second round of interviews, when asked about his/her top three goals, there

was a distinct shift from goals focused on staff to goals focused on students. For example there was a 17 percent increase in “*equity/improving all students growth/proficiency*” goals while at the same time a 17 percent decrease in mentions around “*overall staff goals.*”

This language shift continued when asked about how the participant would know if she/he had attained their goals. There was a 23 percent decrease in mentions around “*staff targets/administration goal achievement*” with a 16 percent increase in “*increased student participation/engagement.*”

Use of high leverage leadership practices

After attending the Institute, participants were able to communicate and think through leadership challenges using high leverage leadership practices such as goal setting, feedback, and a focus on student relationships.

When asked about their top three goals there was a distinct transition to the use of high leverage leadership practices showing a 15 percent decrease in general math and reading improvement goals with a 13 percent increase in “*formative assessments/standards based grading*” goals and a 29 percent increase in “*student social skills curriculum/ student relationships*” goals.

When asked about how they know if the goals have been attained, it became apparent that participants were using high leverage leadership practices to measure goal performance with a 32 percent increase in “*moving target/work in progress/continuous improvement process,*” a 13 percent increase in “*better math test results/Minnesota Comprehensive Achievement Assessments/ Measure of Academic Progress growth,*” and a 22 percent increase in “*anecdotal student engagement reports/teacher to student*”

interaction records.” There was also a reported 8 percent decrease in general comments: *“better assessment score/higher achievement test/data results/reach data point threshold.”*

Cultural awareness and engagement

When asked about their top three goals, there was evidence to suggest participants gained a greater understanding around the importance of a school’s internal culture with data reflecting a 75 percent increase in mentions of the *“school climate/overall building culture/environment”* goal.

When asked about how participants knew if their goals had been attained, “culture” was mentioned more prominently as a metric of success post-wave. The data indicated a 20 percent increase in *“culturally responsive teaching/classes/intercultural inventory/staff competence/trained”* as an outcome, a 14 percent increase in *“equity/reduced disproportionate data/all students achieving growth”* as an outcome, with a 25 percent increase in *“when achievement gap closed/outcomes unaffected by race/gender/culture/EBD/ELL”* as an outcome.

Institute participants also used culture as a lever to drive change. When asked what actions they took to achieve their goals, culture was more likely to be mentioned after participating in the Institute.

Results showed a 32 percent increase in *“cultural competency and responsiveness/educational equity strategy/resources for diversity work,”* 14 percent increase in *“reduce barriers to achievement by all students/full inclusion”* and a 17 percent increase in *“inspire belief/share beliefs/express vision/energize/be courageous.”* An increase in cultural and racial awareness of

students, staff, and school and how it impacts learning was evident after participating in the Institute.

Discussion

The results of this study are based upon the growth experienced by leaders who participated in the Institute for Courageous Leadership for two years, and they point to three areas deserving increased attention when attempting to build principal leadership capacity:

- 1) Improved principal’s self-perception of leadership skill capacity on all nine leading strands. Results of this study showed two leading strands increased by more than 70 percent; Understanding Leadership Strengths and Race and Equity;
- 2) Supervisor agreement of the principals’ perception of his/her own improved skill capacity;
- 3) Principal language shifts about strategic leadership and implementation. These shifts showed specific increases in the use of language around high leverage leadership strategies, a shift from staff-focused thinking to student-focused thinking and cultural awareness and engagement.

While these findings show encouraging shifts in principal views of their own leadership capacity as well as their use of language and planning, further study is needed. It is important to determine, for example, the long-term sustainability of the improvements leaders experienced with the nine leading strands. It also becomes important to track if other positive and impactful principal behavior shifts are evidenced as a result of these improved areas of leadership.

Finally, a positive change in student achievement, as a result of this leadership development becomes the final determinant and

measure of the fundamental effectiveness of these leaders' self-perception and language shifts.

While multiple factors contribute to school achievement such as income, mobility and language, leaders with a strong racial consciousness will foundationally lead more

effectively while considering these additional factors.

For in the final analysis, until principals lead schools where children of color are learning at levels equal to that of their White peers, without exception and without excuse, we believe that the predictable racial patterns of achievement in this country will persist.

Author Biographies

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Principals' Perceptions Regarding Their Supervision and Evaluation

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of principals concerning principal evaluation and supervisory feedback. Principals were asked two open-ended questions. Respondents included 82 principals in the Rocky Mountain region. The emerging themes were *Superintendent Performance*, *Principal Evaluation Components*, *Specific Feedback Needs*, and *Reflective Feedback*. Principals consistently referred to the performance and competency of the superintendent as important in the evaluation of the principals. They identified four components regarding their ideal evaluation. Principals also described feedback needs and identified three types of reflective feedback. Results from this study provided three implications for those who supervise principals, as well as for those who train superintendents.

Key Words

principal evaluation, principal supervision, feedback

The evaluation of principals is a mandated and legal responsibility for school districts and school boards. Recent accountability demands including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top (NCLB, 2001; USDOE, 2009) have focused attention on the role of principals.

For the first time, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) has sponsored a series of initiatives focused on the importance of principals in successful schools (Superville, 2014).

Since principals' performance is directly related to increased student performance (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), and is second to teaching as an influence on the success of students (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004); 34 states have passed accountability legislation to improve the performance of principals (Jacques, Clifford, & Hornung, 2012).

Although the principals' responsibilities have been documented by a variety of researchers (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Marzano et al., 2005) there is a lack of research regarding how principals perceive their supervision and evaluation and how these evaluations are accomplished (Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011).

Although the principal evaluation process in many states is based on standards, they are not used with consistency (Miller, 2014; Reeves, 2008).

Critical factors for principal evaluation from the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals

(NASSP) include six domains for principal evaluation systems:

- 1) professional growth and learning;
- 2) student growth and achievement;
- 3) school planning and progress;
- 4) school culture;
- 5) professional qualities and instructional leadership;
- 6) stakeholder support and engagement (Clifford & Ross, 2012).

Both the NAESP and the NASSP agree principals should be involved when establishing an evaluation system (Clifford & Ross, 2011).

The Wallace Foundation (2013) includes five key practices:

- 1) vision;
- 2) climate;
- 3) cultivating leadership;
- 4) improving instruction;
- 5) managing people, data, and processes.

Derrington and Sharratt (2008) report 43 states use Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards in some fashion for principal evaluation and that these standards reflect the performance of the principal. Because the roles and responsibilities for principals are so complex (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Portin, 1998), assessing principals is difficult (Goldring et al., 2009; Harrison & Peterson, 1998).

Protheroe (2008) in a study of elementary principals found that 80% of principals are evaluated yearly while 8% of the principals are evaluated rarely or not at all. Reeves (2008) described the state of leadership evaluation as broken with more than 18% of leaders not receiving an evaluation. He described a concern of principal evaluation

the use of poorly defined leadership standards. Additionally, past principal evaluation models were not used with fidelity and did not appear to evaluate the performance of principals (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985; Stronge, 2013).

Because the research base regarding principal evaluation is very limited with 28 peer-reviewed articles regarding principal evaluation available from 1980—2010 (Davis et al., 2011), the intent of this study is to contribute to the body of research informing principal evaluation.

Research Design and Methods

The goals of this qualitative study were to explore the perceptions of principals concerning (a) their perception of an ideal principal evaluation; and (b) their perceptions regarding supervisory feedback during their supervision and evaluation.

Two research questions guided the qualitative inquiry:

1. How would you describe the ideal principal evaluation?
2. How does your principal evaluation and supervisory feedback improve your performance as a leader?

The study used an online tool to collect perceptions from principals regarding the evaluation and supervision of principals.

Study participants and instrument

Participants solicited included 266 principals from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, or schools including kindergarten through eighth grade and/or twelfth grade in the Rocky Mountain region. Out of the participants solicited, 82 agreed to participate (34%

response rate).

Principals were asked two open-ended questions; one question asked about the ideal principal evaluation and the other question asked about the principal evaluation, supervisory feedback, and the improvement of principal performance.

Data Analysis and Findings

The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to determine codes and themes. The process included coding and re-coding until themes emerged (Hatch, 2002).

The emerging themes for the first research question were *Superintendent Performance* and *Principal Evaluation Components*. The emerging themes for the second research question were *Reflective Feedback* and *Specific Feedback Needs*. The findings of the study are organized by each research question.

Research question one

Research question one asked, “How would you describe the ideal principal evaluation?” The emerging themes for question one were *Superintendent Performance* and *Principal Evaluation Components*.

Superintendent performance

Principals consistently referred to the performance of the superintendent or primary supervisor as a critical factor in their evaluations. Principals claimed superintendents needed to be competent and “highly trained in supervision and cognitive coaching. The capability of the superintendent was a critical factor in the performance of the evaluation.”

Principals commented regarding the superintendents’ responsibility to establish a fair and non-threatening climate for the

evaluation. Honesty was a desired quality and the vision or description of required improvements communicated by the superintendents “needed to be clear and concise rather than a vague generalization.”

Principals reported that superintendents have the ability to conduct evaluations in a collaborative manner. Principals clearly wanted superintendents to be involved and lead conversations as an “on-going dialogue about building the best principal.”

This conversation between the principal and superintendent included ideas to be used for improvement. Additional elements included “personal and professional” discussions about student achievement results in the manner of a professional learning community.

Participants also mentioned the evaluation instrument. One principal commented, “... an evaluation tool is only as good as the person giving it.” The superintendent should have “a clear understanding of the evaluation instrument and components.” The evaluation should be carried out with an emphasis on trust between superintendents and principals. One principal had a divergent view and described evaluation as a “bureaucratic process for getting rid of ineffective principals.”

Principal evaluation components

Principals identified four components regarding their ideal evaluation including: identified responsibilities, professional growth, student achievement, and an instructional leadership focus.

1. *Identified responsibilities*

Participants discussed the ideal evaluation and how it should include identified responsibilities based on the characteristics

of effective principals. One principal emphasized that the responsibilities should be clearly understood and might be in the form of a predetermined rubric with “exemplars as examples of best practice.”

Another principal mentioned using a rubric based on ISLLC standards or Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (MCREL) standards. He also discussed how an important factor should be the “complete alignment with the job description and responsibilities” and that the evaluation should be “based on the actual job and not theory.”

Other principals discussed how some of the responsibilities should include an emphasis on safety, academics, social areas, school climate, and stakeholder satisfaction. One principal stated the responsibilities in an ideal evaluation should align with district mission and goals.

2. *Professional growth*

Principals described professional growth within an ideal evaluation based on their continuous improvement. They stated evaluation should include “an assessment of where you are and how to get better.”

One principal indicated the evaluation process should “maximize your potential” as a principal. Goals and objectives should be clearly understood and communicated based on data. One principal described professional development as necessary for growth as a principal and having to find professional development opportunities without district support.

3. *Student achievement*

Increased student achievement was included in the description of an ideal

evaluation in the form of student growth and attaining performance levels. One principal declared an evaluation should include results from academic measures by using the ACT, state assessments, and Measured Academic Progress (MAP) assessments to demonstrate student achievement.

The evaluation should contain a “high emphasis on setting reasonable achievement and growth targets and those targets being met.” Another principal stated that goals are measured by progress and the presentation of “artifacts, survey data, and student achievement data.”

4. *An instructional leadership focus*

Principals discussed how the ideal evaluation should be “based upon the efforts to improve instruction within the school.”

Teacher effectiveness and student growth were described as being critical components for the demonstration of instructional leadership. One principal stated the evaluation should “distinguish between those areas that are managerial and those that are instructional leadership.” Principals identified instructional leadership based on increased student achievement as a critical component of their evaluations.

Research question two

Research question two asked, “How does your principal evaluation and supervisory feedback improve your performance as a leader?” The two emerging themes regarding feedback from supervision and evaluation were *Specific Feedback Needs* and *Reflective Feedback*.

Specific feedback needs

Principals discussed the importance of feedback in an ideal evaluation. One principal stated that an ideal evaluation would include “specific feedback on ways to improve instructional leadership” and to “identify areas for improvement.”

Another principal described the ideal evaluation as one that, “... is going to lead me on a path of improvement. It does not just tell me what I am doing well, it tells me what I can do better and gives ideas on how I can do better.” Principals wanted feedback on a consistent and frequent basis as a result of an ongoing supervision cycle. Principals described the feedback in an evaluation as coming from frequent school visits by the superintendent. The specific feedback should be targeted on improving instructional leadership “no matter how many years you have been in the position.”

In response to specific feedback needs, principals were clear regarding how they felt about the importance of feedback and the need to connect the feedback to the performance of the principal.

One principal stated, “the performance evaluation gives me feedback which is necessary to keep current and grow in this profession.” He continued by discussing how feedback should be “direct” and “allowed him to see opportunities for improvement and to seek ways to improve.”

Another principal discussed how feedback needs to be “honest” as well as “helpful and insightful.” The feedback should also “guide professional development” and

“affirms the good work.” A principal summed up his response by stating, “The evaluation nothing, the feedback everything.”

Principals also believed the feedback should come from other sources besides the superintendent, with “an emphasis on genuine stakeholder feedback.” The source for generating feedback for an evaluation could come from “self and peer/supervisory input” with “multiple stakeholder inputs” obtained from “teachers, parents, and superintendents.”

One principal requested feedback in the form of a 360-degree assessment including feedback from stakeholders. Another principal simply stated receiving “input into how I can get better from those who work for me” as the most useful form of feedback. One principal requested feedback in the form of an “an anonymous evaluation by the teachers so the principal can improve in aspects not discussed by the superintendent.”

One respondent had a conflicting view regarding feedback from the evaluation, “I believe the instrument relies too heavily on community participation and involvement in critical processes and decisions that should be the educator’s decision ... from my experience at board meetings, the community is sometimes best left out of critical decision making as they are not well grounded in what is best for kids.”

Several deficiencies in receiving feedback from superintendents were emphasized as “falls short” because it “generally is occurring three—six months after the fact.” The feedback is not frequent enough for change to occur in principal performance, “my evaluator sees me about one time per year.” Responses from principals regarding the effectiveness of evaluative or supervisory

feedback were, “It does not” and “I am not sure that it has improved my performance.”

Principals described the importance of increasing the frequency of feedback from a superintendent. “Doing periodic walk-throughs with the superintendent to evaluate my progress towards instructional goals supports me the way I hope to be supporting my teachers.”

One principal commented, “In my view, the informal day-to-day discussions seem to have a much greater impact than the formal summative evaluation.” This comment was echoed by another principal who stated, “The conversations that happen between the superintendent and me concerning my job are of more importance than the evaluation.” One respondent “met regularly with their direct supervisor to review their goals and individual progress towards meeting them.”

Principals reported desiring feedback directly connected to goal setting, growth, and a focus on school and district goals. Feedback “keeps me focused on our district goals, school improvement goals, and student outcomes.” The feedback “creates a common set of expectations for principal leadership” and is “strongly rooted in a growth model rather than a compliance model.”

Reflective feedback

Principals identified three types of reflective feedback including self-directed feedback or self-reflection, self-directed feedback prior to a supervisory conference of evaluation, and reflective feedback following a supervisory conference. Principals described feedback as being “self-directed” and that “self-reflection is of most value.” A principal reported, “I am self-motivated and I improve my performance by staying informed on important issues and continuing to learn with my faculty.”

This solitary method of self-reflective feedback to improve performance as a leader appeared to be without the benefit of supervisory feedback from a supervisor. A principal discounted the effect of feedback as “very little [regarding improving performance as a leader] self-reflection is of most value.”

Principals reported reflective feedback could also occur when principals self-reflect about job performance in preparation for an evaluation meeting with superintendents.

One principal stated “self-assesses prior to the evaluation meeting with my superintendent. At the meeting we discuss the commonalities and differences in my self-assessment and his evaluation of me. As we discuss we come to a common rating.”

The reflective feedback was generated through a collaborative process and was communicated through a professional “conversation.” One principal established a connection between reflection and feedback: “Feedback leads to reflection which leads to growth as a school leader.”

Reflective feedback can also occur following an evaluation. Feedback “causes me to reflect on my practice and work on refining areas that could use more attention.” Principals stated feedback from a superintendent or evaluator creates an opportunity to reflect and “helps me think about what I need to be doing better to facilitate learning in my buildings.” This feedback also “allows a principal to be reflective and self-evaluative.”

A principal stated reflective feedback, “helped me see myself through a different set of eyes. Sometimes that means getting through blind spots that I have about myself. The

feedback provided helps to compliment and clarify what the superintendent sees me doing.”

Implications and Discussion

This qualitative study revealed principals’ perceptions regarding their supervision and evaluation. As the performance of principals is critical to the functioning of a successful school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), these insights of principals regarding their supervision and evaluation could contribute to an environment supporting the improvement of principals’ behaviors. An effective supervision and evaluation model is imperative for the improvement of principals’ performance (Stronge, 2013).

Results from this study provide three implications for those who supervise principals, as well as for those who train principal supervisors or superintendents.

First implication

Principals consistently referred to the performance of superintendents as important in the supervision and evaluation of principals.

Principals describe superintendents as needing to be competent and well trained regarding the evaluation standards (Thomas & Vornberg, 1991) and to be able to communicate potential areas of improvement for principals.

Harrison and Peterson (1988) found that 80% of the surveyed superintendents felt they communicated clear expectations while 42% of the principals felt superintendents were not clear with their expectations. Corcoran and colleagues (2013) recommend the role and competencies for superintendents should be clearly communicated to all members of the organization. This process of communicating

expectations should be a critical element for principals and superintendents.

Trust between principals and superintendents appears to be a significant component supported by Okasana, Zepeda, and Bengtson's (2012) study where transparency, dialogue, trust, and respect were themes in the evaluation of principals. Derrington and Sanders (2011) describe trust as "the glue of day-to-day life in the supervisory partnership between the principal and evaluator" (p. 34). Davis and colleagues (2011) posit trust and relationship building between superintendents and principals is possibly more important than the content of the evaluation.

Second implication

Principals' identified four components regarding their ideal evaluation including: identified responsibilities, professional growth, student achievement, and an instructional leadership focus.

The ideal evaluation should include identified responsibilities and be based on the characteristics of effective principals. This viewpoint is consistent with Catano and Stronge (2006) who found a relationship between the ISLLC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) and the practice of principal evaluation in Virginia.

Derrington and Sharratt (2008) found principals and superintendents supported using the ISLLC standards in principal evaluation models. Goldring and colleagues (2009) described a disconnect between principal evaluation and critical leadership behaviors regarding the application of "rigorous curriculum and quality instruction" (p. 34) and found that out of 44 urban school districts, 19 districts did not provide any information regarding standards.

Professional growth is a critical domain for the improvement of principals' practice and is represented by self-reflection, continuous improvement, attending national conferences, and professional development at the national, state, or district level (Clifford & Ross, 2012).

Professional development should be provided for new principals in the form of mentoring and should be embedded in the practice of experienced principals (Clifford & Ross, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2008). Davis and colleagues (2011) found that "evaluation should stimulate and guide a principal's professional development" (p. 33).

Principals and superintendents should both be responsible for student gains in performance based on timely data (Corcoran et al., 2013). One organization recommends basing a principal's evaluation on 70% of student achievement and teacher effectiveness (New Leaders, 2012).

Clifford and Ross (2012) support a more balanced accountability system with growth models and multiple assessment measures. Sanders, Kearney, and Vince (2012) discuss using multiple forms of data, methods, and measures for principal evaluations.

Honig (2012) supports using central office administrators as Instructional Leader Directors (ILD) to engage with principals to strengthen principals' abilities as instructional leaders. In a survey of principal supervisors, Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios (2013) found the major tasks were visiting the schools, discussing instructional issues, evaluating principals, coaching and conducting professional development.

Instructional leadership is important to principals in principal evaluation instruments

(Catano & Stronge, 2006). Miller (2014) describes improving the instructional leadership potential in principal supervisors to develop more effective principals. In the past, these supervisors did not have the time or training to properly supervise and evaluate principals.

Third implication

Principals were very clear regarding the importance of feedback in an ideal evaluation. They requested specific feedback to improve instructional leadership and target areas for improvement.

The desired feedback should be delivered consistently, frequently, and embedded in an ongoing supervision cycle much like formative supervision for teachers (Range, Young, & Hvidston, 2012). This finding is similar to what Okasana, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) found. They stated feedback is a critical theme in principal evaluation. Principals described the feedback in an evaluation as coming from frequent school visits by superintendents. Oksana, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) describe these visits as a “process, not an event” (p. 224).

Frequently feedback for principals is not meaningful, is not delivered in a timely manner (Reeves, 2008; Stronge, 2013), and does not inform professional development (McMahon, Peters, & Schumacher, 2014).

A discrepancy between the perceptions of superintendents and principals’ perceptions regarding school visits has been cited. Harrison and Peterson (1988) found 80% of superintendents reporting frequent school visits while only 37% of principals agree. Principals also reported that superintendents had limited time observing principals at schools (McMahon, Peters, & Schumacher, 2014). It is

possible, superintendents will need to systematically plan and carry out school visits for the purpose of observation and feedback.

Moore (2009) offers a 360-degree evaluation model with input from multiple stakeholders including teachers, students, and parents as well as comparable principals as sources for feedback.

Although the use of feedback is prevalent in other disciplines such as medicine and the military, the formative use of feedback in performance evaluation for principals has had limited investigative research (Portin, Feldman, & Knapp, 2006).

Reeves (1998, 2008) supports time for self-evaluation and reflection. He advocates for evaluating principals based on judgment rather than compliance. Principals have many decisions to make during the course of a day and these principals need to reflect and self-evaluate to be continuously improving as leaders.

Elmore (2005) describes the need for matching accountable leadership with internal accountability, which is defined as “coherence and alignment among individual’s conceptions of what they are responsible for...” (p. 140).

It is possible self-reflection could elevate internal accountability and support continuous improvement for principals. Although educators are well aware of feedback and its importance to learning (Hattie & Temperly, 2007), superintendents need to support principals, offer meaningful feedback, and build formative opportunities in the evaluation process. Derrington and Sanders (2011) include a self-evaluation for principals in a system of principal evaluation.

Principal supervision and evaluation is receiving national attention (Connelly & Bartoletti, 2012) and the lack of research has been noted for the last thirty years (Davis et al., 2011) Clearly the need to improve the use of consistent standards such as ISLLC combined with principal evaluators who can improve instructional leadership for principals is critical. Principal evaluators need to be well-trained, competent, and able to build trusting

relationships. University preparation programs for superintendents would benefit from an academic focus on the formative and summative components of principal evaluation.

The end result of effective principal supervision and evaluation should be improving the performance of principals resulting in powerful academic results for students.

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Measuring Teacher Effectiveness: The Impact of Institutional Culture on Initial Implementation of New York's Annual Professional Performance Review

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Abstract

As part of the *American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009*, The U.S. Department of Education sponsored the *Race to the Top* competition to encourage education reforms anchored in improving teacher effectiveness as a driver for improving student-achievement outcomes and closing achievement gaps. The New York State legislature revised regulations related to the Annual Professional Performance Review for teachers and subsequently was awarded almost \$700 million in the second round of the competition. Using data obtained from document analysis and semi-structured interviews of elite policy makers and key implementers, this qualitative policy analysis explored the operational, fiscal, and political challenges and facilitators to implementation of the new teacher-evaluation system. This study used institutional theory to identify the intent and theory of action of the policy agenda, and explore the impact that the culture of the educational institutional had on implementation of the policy in local school districts.

Key Words

APPR, Teacher Evaluation, Race To The Top

Introduction

As a high school principal during the inception of the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) competition, and then as an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction during initial implementation of the subsequently revised teacher evaluation system in New York State (NYS), I have seen firsthand the tidal wave of change that has swept public education.

As a doctoral candidate during this same time period, I determined that educators needed to understand through a researcher's lens how the federal policy agenda being implemented translated from the federal to the local level, what impact implementation was having on the institution of public education, and why. Understanding the NYS experience is more significant than ever before now that the commissioner of education for NYS who oversaw this implementation is serving as a senior advisor to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

To determine the answers to these questions, I undertook a study that examined the intent and theory of action of teacher evaluation in RTTT, the operational, fiscal, and political adaptations that were occurring within districts, the impact of high-stakes accountability, and the impact of organizational culture on implementation of the new teacher evaluation system.

I interviewed policy makers at the federal and state level as well as regional and local school district superintendents after the initial year of implementation in NYS and learned many lessons that should give pause to education policy makers who are committed to the current approach to accountability-driven education reform.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) set an aspirational goal of proficiency for all students by 2014. Schools across the nation worked diligently toward this goal and demonstrated progress on state assessments, although scores on national and international assessments did not mirror the same results.

The recession of 2008 introduced new financial challenges to states and school districts across the country. In NYS, the recently established adjustments to foundation aid formulas and school funding were halted due to the challenges from the recession. New York State subsequently used funds from the *American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009* (ARRA) to establish the Gap Elimination Adjustment, in an attempt to partially fill the resulting funding void.

In 2010, NYS imposed a 2% tax levy cap, which limited the amount that districts could increase taxes on communities from year to year, resulting in even further financial stress on school districts. As the 2014 deadline for proficiency loomed, more low and average wealth schools were failing to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). These converging economic and academic stressors created the perfect storm, with a critical mass of schools and districts desperately in need of a lifeboat.

To assist states in meeting their academic obligations in this fiscally challenging time, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) competition as part of the ARRA.

The goal of this competition was to encourage education reforms anchored in improving teacher effectiveness, in an effort to increase academic outcomes and close

achievement gaps. This grant opportunity appeared to be the needed lifeboat in the midst of this perfect storm.

The theory of action inherent in RTTT illustrated the federal policy agenda—by adopting college and career ready standards, using data strategically, and improving teaching, student achievement would increase.

With the Obama/Duncan administration having been directly influenced by the work of Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) in the Widget Effect Report (Chicago Public Schools participated in the study while Secretary Duncan was the Chief Executive Officer), designers of RTTT saw reforming teacher evaluation as a key lever in bringing about the goals of RTTT.

To be competitive, states were required to establish teacher evaluation systems that held teachers and principals directly accountable for student outcomes (i.e. student results on standardized tests). The NYS legislature, with the guidance of the board of regents, education department, and governor, revised regulations related to the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for teachers, to better position itself for this competitive grant, and subsequently was awarded almost \$700 million in the second round of the competition.

What Educators Think and Know Matters When Implementing Change

Organizational institutions are structured by regulations, norms, and beliefs. Regulations dictate the processes and procedures of the work, norms relate to how people behave and what they value, and beliefs speak to what people think and know. In loosely coupled organizations, like schools, regulation is

primarily focused on efficiency and management of the organization as opposed to dictating the actual technical core of the work—teaching.

Change within organizations is generally caused by adoption of policy, regulation, incentives, and sanctions (coercive levers); adaptations in values (normative levers); or adoption of practices from other successful examples within similar organizations (mimetic levers).

Not surprisingly, coercive change levers like those used within RTTT are the most effective at forcing change in organizations. The greatest amount of resistance and conflict occurs, though, when those levers create change that is contrary to what people in the organization think and know to be true. What educators know—and what the current reform agenda runs contrary to—is that statistical problems are real problems and that high-stakes accountability does not work in reforming schools.

Educators know APPR not comparable across districts

Teacher evaluation systems resulting from the RTTT competition are designed on the premise of using multiple measures of teacher evaluation, which is a recommendation underscored throughout the literature.

The NYS APPR is comprised of three components—teacher practice (as measured by multiple observers using a standards-based rubric), state growth measures (either a state assigned growth score or a teacher and principal determined Student Learning Objective), and a local measure (a locally agreed upon assessment of student growth or achievement). Teachers are assigned a

numerical score and a rating of either: (a) Highly Effective, (b) Effective, Developing, or (c) Ineffective.

While NYS predetermined scoring ranges for the overall model and the state growth portion, each district was responsible for negotiating the content and scoring of the teacher practice and local assessment portions.

This approach created the lack of comparability that now exists across the state, as approximately 700 different districts now have almost as many different versions of the APPR. Comparing one district's percentage of effective teachers to another's is inaccurate and inappropriate given this lack of comparability.

Educators know APPR not reliable

The design of the APPR is similar to the recommended models found in reports emanating from the *Measures of Effective Teaching Project* (MET; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010; 2012; 2013).

These reports included data from districts that did not have any consequences tied to the results and used unorthodox approaches to reliability and controlling for bias. Setting those issues aside, and applying the recommendations of the MET reports the only reliable range in the APPR is the highly effective range.

The lower the teacher score on the APPR, the less reliable the APPR as a measure becomes until it reaches the ineffective range, where the teacher's score has the potential to be determined solely based on student outcomes, which is contrary to the whole concept of using multiple measures for evaluation. As reliability decreases, consequences increase.

Educators know student test scores not valid measure of teacher effectiveness

A significant body of research exists which correlates student achievement data to various qualities of the teacher, whether teaching practices or teacher descriptors (i.e. certification type, experience, salary, etc.; Ferguson & Brown, 2000; Hanushek, 2003; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2010; Kimball, White, Milanowski, & Borman, 2004; Milanowski, Kimball, & White, 2004).

Having not found a “silver-bullet” for systemic reform through these practices or descriptors, researchers and policy makers turned to using statistical models, such as Value-Added Modeling (VAM) of test scores to attempt to measure teacher contribution to the learning process. Once contributions were isolated, then theoretically schools could learn from those that contributed the most and remove those that contributed the least.

Educators know that the tests used to measure the “value-added” by teachers were not designed for that purpose. They were designed to measure student achievement on a fixed set of standards and content. They were not validated for a full range of student learning objectives, and were not validated for measuring teachers, so they cannot be seen as a valid measure for this purpose.

Additionally, there are significant statistical problems inherent in these types of multiple regression models including the influence of bias, lack of stability, influence of outside factors, inappropriateness of using these statistical models to judge the work of individual teachers, and the inability of the models to establish a causal relationship

between teacher practices and student scores. There is evidence that student achievement is *correlated* to particular teacher practices, but there is no conclusive evidence that a particular teacher directly *causes* increased student achievement. Policy makers relying on VAM make the classic error of confusing correlation for causation. Thus, evaluating teacher effectiveness using student test scores lacks both reliability and validity.

Designers of the NYS APPR attempted to supplement this limitation by incorporating elements of teacher observed practice. Although this broadens the skills measured, it still does not fully assess all aspects of effective teaching, which means the evaluation as a whole is under-representative of the qualities required to fully demonstrate teacher effectiveness, rendering the model invalid for the purposes of determining consequences such as retention, tenure, or firing. Employment evaluations, which are a significant factor in employment decisions, must be comparable, reliable, and valid in order to be fair. Educators know that the APPR in its current form is not any of these.

Educators know high-stakes accountability does not deliver on its promises

High-stakes accountability systems do not significantly improve student achievement, and in fact have no statistically significant impact on the scores of students in reaching proficiency. There may be some evidence that high-stakes accountability assists in moving students to basic levels of performance, but once student demographics are controlled for, even those minimal effects disappear. Research has yet to prove high-stakes accountability will move students to proficiency and close achievement gaps. There is wide evidence, though, that high-stakes accountability systems have caused a narrowing of the curriculum and

reduced the amount of time that students spend being instructed in non-accountability subjects.

High-stakes accountability systems have also been shown to foster psychological exhaustion, harkening to the effectiveness of prior practices, criticizing of the rate of implementation, and mobilizing against the leader of the reform. All these same reactions were evident during initial implementation of the NYS APPR, with an increased amount of stress evident in schools, many educators stating that the old teacher-evaluation system worked fine, broad agreement that the rate of change was one of the primary flaws of implementation, and the New York State United Teachers passing a vote of no confidence in the Commissioner of Education. Additionally, superintendents reported a great amount of fear, anxiety, stress, demotivation, and demoralization among educators resulting from the high-stakes consequences associated with the new regulations. (Champ, 2014).

High-stakes testing itself has historically fostered a variety of pathological responses including increasing focus on test-taking skills, regurgitation of exemplary models, increasing use of test-coaching books, narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and cheating. Psychological pathologies have also been documented, ranging from mild cases of self-doubt to suicide or physical violence toward others. These responses date back centuries and persist today despite efforts to combat them.

These reactions will likely continue to work against successful implementation of the reform agenda as long as high-stakes consequences remain a part of the teacher evaluation. Decades of research on high-stakes accountability systems have taught us these things, yet policy makers continue to “double

down” on accountability as an approach to education reform.

Need trumps knowledge in implementation

Educators know that statistical problems are real problems. Educators know that high-stakes accountability does not substantively increase student achievement. And educators in NYS are experiencing the turmoil and anxiety that comes along with implementing change that runs contrary to what they think and know.

So why are some educators fighting and resisting the change, while some are embracing and supporting the change? How does the leader’s perspective impact implementation of this policy agenda?

To answer those questions, one need only go back to the setting of the perfect storm—trying to make AYP with reduced resources. The price of admission into the RTTT lifeboat was educators having to set aside what they think and know to be true to access precious funds in the hopes of making AYP and escaping sanctions. Academic conditions as well as potential funding streams served as coercive change levers creating a willingness on the part of educators to override whatever cognitive dissonance they may have had with the reform agenda and accept the theory of action that came with procuring needed funding.

According to Champ (2014), support for the RTTT theory of action was evident from superintendents of average- and low-wealth districts, all of whom had subgroups not making AYP. These superintendents accepted RTTT funding, and made attempts to implement the new teacher evaluation as a formative tool.

These superintendents saw the implementation of new standards with accompanying assessments for accountability as positive. Goals and practices within the organization were realigned to reflect the theory of action, and efforts were made to improve teaching as the vehicle to improve academic achievement.

Superintendents of high wealth districts, whose schools were continuing to make AYP, and who did not accept RTTT funding, disagreed with the theory of action.

These superintendents believed current teacher practices were already effective and that high-stakes accountability would continue to narrow the curriculum. These superintendents complied with the requirements of the regulations, but made sure to protect the core work of the organization from the perceived damaging effects of high-stakes accountability (Champ, 2014). As the funding went, so went the belief system, so went the implementation.

Recommendations

With the heavy reliance that the RTTT and APPR placed on coercive levers of regulation and funding, and a theory of action that is as of yet unsupported by research or results, implementation risks a superficial, compliance-oriented implementation instead of any real substantive diffusion of practices that could potentially improve teaching or student achievement.

One NYS senior official stated that, “There’s over thirty years of using a multiple measures system to evaluate teachers including student achievement levels with positive outcomes for improving those levels. So we’ve

gotta [sic] agree that that research is there” (Senior Official, personal communication, October 1, 2013).

The uncomfortable truth is, though, that the research is simply not there. According to Murphy, Hallinger, and Heck (2013), “There is a robust body of empirical work that informs us that if school improvement is the goal, school leaders would be advised to spend their time and energy in areas other than teacher evaluation.” The obtuseness of policy makers on this point simply fuels the general level of distrust among education practitioners in the field who are implementing policy handed down from those who reveal their lack of knowledge on this important front.

If real acceptance and substantive implementation of these types of teacher evaluation systems is to occur, policy makers and implementers need to align evaluation models with what educators know about effective supervision from research and proven best-practices.

Teacher evaluation systems should assess teacher competency in areas that are proven to increase student achievement as well as other important student outcomes. Reform leaders need to increase the opportunity for teachers to learn and practice techniques that are known to improve teaching and increase student achievement.

Perhaps the most important adjustment policy makers could make is to remove the high-stakes elements of the evaluation system to reduce the chronic, pathological organizational reactions. As long as these high-stakes consequences are attached to teacher evaluation, the curriculum will continue to narrow, teachers will continue to teach to the test, businesses will profit from tutoring and

test-preparation-material production, and cheating will persist in various forms.

Anxiety and fear will remain, and teachers will become more disengaged. These results will stand in the way of APPR and RTTT fulfilling their intended goal of improving teaching and increasing student achievement.

Federal policy makers should look for ways to provide funding to states and schools without attaching individual high-stakes consequences to principals, teachers, or students. Policy should support the professionalizing of educators, foster engagement; and encourage collaboration, internal accountability, and use of specialized expertise.

Value Added Models should not be used at the individual teacher level, especially for teachers of students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and small classes. VAM could more appropriately be used as part of state and large-school district report cards, as it provides more valid and reliable information for programmatic evaluation. It could also be provided to schools as informative, informal data to guide programmatic decisions.

Participants in the NYS APPR study felt that the APPR was intended to provide a formative tool for teacher improvement as well as an expedited path to removal of ineffective teachers (Champ, 2014).

It would seem that trying to serve both purposes has rendered the APPR weak at serving either. Tenure reform, combined with a formative teacher evaluation focused on professionalism and true development of teacher practice is more likely to result in an improved teaching force.

After one year of implementation of new Common Core assessments and the new APPR, 31% of students scored proficient in both ELA and math while 95% of teachers were rated effective or highly effective. One year and hundreds of millions of dollars later 31% and 36% of students scored proficient in

ELA and math, respectively, with little change in teacher effectiveness rates. The incongruity of these statistics and the lack of significant growth might be an early indication that we climbed aboard the wrong lifeboat and have instead plunged into the vortex of another perfect storm.

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