

effective schools require effective principals

A study of professional development for principals offers these findings about the qualities and impact of strong programs.

At long last, scholars and policy makers have come to realize what most school administrators have known for years — that effective schools require both outstanding teachers and strong leaders.

Public demands for more effective schools have placed growing attention on the crucial role of school leaders — a professional group largely overlooked by the various educational reform movements of the past two decades. Evidence suggests that, second only to the influences of classroom instruction, school leadership strongly affects student learning (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004).

Although there is considerable research about the characteristics of effective school leaders and the strategies principals can use to help manage increasingly diverse roles, comparatively little is known about how to design programs that can develop and sustain effective leadership practices.

Most scholars and practitioners today

agree that traditional methods of preparing administrators fall short of providing the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to lead schools and advance student learning in an increasingly complex and diverse society (Elmore, 1999; NCATE, 2000; Dilworth and Thomas, 2001; Peterson, 2002). Moreover, many of the methods used to prepare school leaders have surprisingly weak empirical support.

Internships and cohort groups

For example, while it is clear that clinical fieldwork is important for developing leadership skills, it is not clear what internship structures, activities and time frames are most effective in cultivating the capacity to lead. Also, the use of cohort groups has become quite popular. Yet, little is known about the relationship of cohort structure and function to the development of the leadership skills

by Michelle LaPointe and Stephen H. Davis

needed to promote powerful teaching and learning.

There are many other examples where the link between the practices and methods used to develop principals and the application of leadership skills to advance student learning lack strong empirical support (Kolb and Boyatzis, 1999; Daresh, 2001; Baugh, 2003).

However, the development of principals is a consequence of not just the attributes of individual preparation programs, but also the policy and fiscal support provided by state and local legislatures and regulatory agencies. Unfortunately, almost no research exists that examines in any depth how state funding and policy frameworks influence the quality of principal preparation programs and, ultimately, the ability of programs to produce leaders who can promote powerful teaching and learning.

The Stanford School Leadership Study

In an effort to increase the knowledge about professional development programs, the Wallace Foundation recently commissioned a study of innovative principal professional development programs and the policy and funding mechanisms that support them. In fall 2003, a team of researchers from the Stanford School of Education was awarded a Wallace grant and proceeded to design and embark upon a nationwide study of both the pre- and in-service professional development of school principals.

Our initial goal was to identify programs that contained many of the design and content elements described in the literature on effective principal development as well as programs that were most frequently mentioned by experts in the field. As per the requirements of the Wallace grant, we needed to provide a national perspective vs. a single state or region.

We quickly came to the realization that the number of reputable programs across the country was vast and virtually impossible to rank in terms of their effectiveness in producing strong instructional leaders (a critical foci of the Wallace grant). So, we searched not for the “best programs” in the country, but rather, for programs

that had a strong reputation for developing instructional leaders and designed in ways that aligned closely with empirically supported principles of leadership development (i.e., program exemplars).

Our study was framed around several

service programs was vast, inconsistent, inchoate and very difficult to generalize. The variations in program structure, content, methods, goals and support systems are immense. Nevertheless, we determined that most programs could

The Stanford School Leadership study was based on several research questions that fall into three categories:

1. Qualities of strong principal development programs

- What are the range of qualities and design principles displayed?
- What are the program components and training strategies for the pre- and in-service professional development for principals? How are they designed and implemented?

2. Context of strong principal development programs

- What role do state, district and institutional policies play in the development of principal development programs?
- What does it cost to provide professional development program?

3. Impact of principal development programs

- Are aspiring principals developing the knowledge and skills taught by these programs?
- Do graduates of strong programs report leadership practice that's more instructionally focused, relative to other leaders?

critical research questions (see box above). In the effort to answer these questions, we examined the literature on school leadership development, interviewed dozens of scholars and experts in the field of educational leadership, reviewed the curricula and structures of numerous pre- and in-service programs across the country, conducted surveys of school principals and teachers in several states, participated in extensive on-site visits of several promising programs and schools led by program graduates, and studied the policy and funding frameworks of the states where program exemplars were identified by the research team.

The research team collected both qualitative and survey data for the programs in the sample, and surveyed a national comparison sample of principals drawn from the membership of the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

We quickly discovered that on a national scale, the array of pre- and in-

fit under one of four general categories: university-based programs, district-initiated programs, third-party programs and partnership programs (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson, 2005).

Key structures, components and methods

After an extensive review and sorting process, we identified eight programs across the country that contained many of the key structures, components and methods described in the literature on principal development and mentioned by experts in the field. We acknowledge that absent strong empirical support, it would be extremely difficult to make claims of program effectiveness. So, we searched instead for highly developed and reputable programs that could stand as exemplars for the field at large.

Each of the programs selected contained a variety of approaches with respect to design, policy context, and the nature of collaborations between school districts and nearby universities. The

eight programs also provided us with access to the graduates of several past cohorts who work as principals in a concentration of school districts.

The pre-service programs selected included the University of San Diego (partnership model), Bank Street College (partnership model), University of Connecticut (university-based model), Jefferson County, KY (the University of

Louisville provides assistance to the district-sponsored credentialing program), and Delta State University (university-based model).

In-service programs included San Diego Public Schools (in partnership with USD), Region 1 of the NYPS (in partnership with Bank Street), Hartford School District (district-based), and Jefferson County, KY.

Several promising third-party, independent professional development programs (New Leaders for New Schools, Big Picture Company) were excluded from the sample because as new programs they have a limited track record and insufficient numbers of graduates.

The Stanford School Leadership Study will be fully completed in winter 2006 and will consist of an in-depth executive report, case studies of the eight featured programs, a review of the literature (published in 2005), and several follow-up articles and conference papers. However, a number of important findings have emerged thus far. We begin with four key findings from the review of the literature.

The body of evidence

First, a growing consensus on the attributes of effective school principals shows that successful school leaders influence student achievement through two important pathways — the support and development of effective teachers and the implementation of effective organizational processes.

This consensus is increasingly reflected in preparation and licensing requirements, which generally subscribe to a set of common expectations for the knowledge, skills and dispositions of school leaders.

Even with the growing body of evidence, additional research is necessary to determine the impact and relative importance of leadership in such key areas as curriculum, assessment and adaptation to local contexts.

Second, evidence indicates that effective programs are research-based, have curricular coherence, provide experience in authentic contexts, use cohort groupings and mentors, and are structured to enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools. Despite anecdotal consensus, supporting empirical evidence is minimal.

Third, as the focus on principal preparation and professional development has intensified, innovations in both leadership development programs and program structures have proliferated. Programmatic approaches to leadership develop-

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ment vary, with some reformers emphasizing leadership and management skills over academic proficiency, while others support the cultivation of teachers who understand instruction deeply and demonstrate leadership potential.

Fourth, effective policy reform is aligned with knowledge of program components and the systems that support their implementation and sustainability. The Delta State program in Mississippi provides a good example of this alignment. However, additional research is needed to examine how various programs are implemented, governed and financed.

What we've learned

To date, several important findings have emerged from the team's examination of the eight programs, the results of the surveys given to program graduates and teachers who work in schools led by program graduates, surveys given to a group of principals who were not graduates of the sample programs, and

the analysis of state fiscal and regulatory policies by The Finance Project (one of our research partners).

1. Program characteristics

Collectively, the eight programs have the reputation of recruiting aspiring principals from under-represented populations, of bringing new people into the principalship, and of developing the leadership qualities of experienced teachers. Our survey of program graduates reinforced this reputation.

In contrast to principals who graduated from other programs, the principals in our sample were more likely to be women (72 percent vs. 46 percent), more likely to be from a racial or ethnic minority group (33 percent vs. 8 percent), and were slightly younger than comparison principals (47 vs. 50 years old).

In sum, the eight programs enroll candidates who better reflect the demographics of the teaching profession and the diversity in the student population than the programs in the comparison groups.

2. School characteristics

In contrast to principals who graduated from other programs, the principals in our sample were more likely to lead schools with greater needs. A much larger proportion of program principals reported working in an urban school than comparison principals (72 percent vs. 18 percent).

In addition, a greater percentage of program principals reported working in schools with larger enrollments, more minority students (66 percent minority vs. 27 percent), and more students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (69 percent eligible for lunch vs. 42 percent).

3. Experience in education

Principals who graduated from our sample of programs and those who graduated from other programs had similar amounts of teaching experiences (average of 13.4 years vs. 14.7 years) but the types of experiences varied. Program principals were less likely to have taught

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secondary school (32 percent vs. 43 percent) and were more likely to have been special education teachers (19 percent vs. 10 percent).

Program principals were also less likely to have been physical education teachers (5 percent vs. 18 percent) or athletic directors/coaches (18 percent vs. 41 percent). In contrast, they were much more likely to have expertise in a core academic area (e.g., a literacy or math coach; 30 percent vs. 8 percent). Thus, the programs in our sample were more likely to select principal candidates who had backgrounds that would lead to strong instructional leadership.

4. Description of the pre-service experience

Graduates from our sample of pre-service programs were more likely to be referred to or recruited into their credentialing program (62 percent vs. 41 percent) by senior administrators and were more likely to get assistance in paying for the cost of their credentialing program (53 percent vs. 21 percent) than graduates from other programs.

Overall, program graduates described the quality and attributes of their program and internship more positively than comparison principals. In contrast to the comparison principals, program graduates were more likely to complete a full-time internship (55 percent vs. 27 percent) and to intern outside of the school where they taught (65 percent vs. 22 percent).

They also reported that their programs implemented strategies and structures recommended in the research literature, including: a comprehensive and coherent program of study; program content that stressed instructional leadership and leadership for school improvement; faculty who were practitioners and knowledgeable in their field of expertise; learning in a cohort structure; the integration of theory and practice; and extensive opportunities to reflect on their experiences

and development as a leader.

(Those components were rated a 4 or better, on a scale of 1–5. These ratings were generally about 1 point higher than the ratings given by the comparison group, and the differences in the ratings were statistically significant).

5. Perceptions of the principalship

Although the differences were slight, program graduates who became principals tend to have a more positive perception of the principalship than principals who graduated from other programs. For

Program principals appear strongly focused on leading teachers and improving instruction in the classroom. They spent less time managing school facilities, maintaining building security, enforcing school rules and attending district meetings.

example, they were more likely to feel that being a principal enabled them to influence school change, develop strong relationships with school stakeholders both inside and outside of the school, maintain regular contact with students, and continue to pursue professional growth activities.

6. Leadership practice

Program principals appear strongly focused on leading teachers and improving instruction in the classroom. For example, they were more likely than comparison principals to regularly use a variety of instructional leadership practices. Such practices included activities that focused on facilitating student learning; building a professional learning community among faculty and other staff; fostering teacher professional development; providing instructional feedback to teachers; working with teachers to improve teaching practices and to resolve challenges

facing the school; and using data to monitor school progress, identify problems and propose solutions.

Interestingly, the activities that program principals were less likely to engage in on a regular basis were related to managing the school facilities, maintaining building security, enforcing school rules and attending district meetings.

7. Ongoing professional development

Program principals not only attended more professional development activities than comparison principals, but found these activities to be more helpful. For example, program principals were nearly twice as likely to visit other schools, to participate in a network of principals, to be mentored by another principal, and to observe and critique the practice of other principals. They were also somewhat more likely to participate in professional development activities along with teachers from their schools.

8. State policy

Our study shows that many states are playing an increasingly active role in promoting effective educational leadership. Some states have worked hard to improve fiscal support for the development of school leaders (e.g., Mississippi is particularly impressive), some have developed a pool of potential school leaders, while others have promoted more rigorous licensing and credentialing requirements.

Many states have launched new efforts to reform the content and structure of principal preparation and professional development programs to improve instructional leadership skills, to provide better assessments of candidate performance, and to make the job more sustainable for those who aspire to lead.

In addition, several states have created and/or sponsored leadership academies to support the ongoing development of principals and, in some cases, superintendents and other leaders as well. These academies often provide a range of programs for leaders, or leadership teams, at different stages of their careers and facing different challenges. Their strategies include workshops and institutes that occur

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throughout the academic year and may be organized as part of a long-range professional development plan.

Academies often serve as vehicles for principal networks and often partner with local universities and districts to meet particular needs (e.g., Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement and North Carolina's Principal Executive Program). In addition, the team acknowledges the growing involvement of professional associations like ACSA in the development of school leaders and their alignment with state credentialing agencies. Our final report will address this in more detail.

As a partner in the Stanford School Leadership Study, The Finance Project (Washington, D.C.) is in the process of profiling the regulatory and fiscal policies in each of the eight states included in our study. Their preliminary analysis has developed a rough framework that the team is using to categorize the policy levers used in these states. A full description of this work will appear in our final report.

9. Cross-case comparisons

Initial findings from our analysis of the case studies suggest that there are some similarities and patterns across the eight exemplary programs in our study. These are listed below:

1. Each program had a strong leader (a champion) who informed, inspired and encouraged others in support of program goals, processes, structures and content. Moreover, each leader actively pursued collaborative relationships with local and regional school districts, and often lobbied university administrators as well as state and local politicians in support of their programs.
2. Recruitment and admission practices were rigorous. Only the most qualified candidates were admitted into the programs. In most programs, the definition of qualified included undergraduate GPA, GRE scores and evidence of teaching competence.
3. Programs were aligned with national, state, district and professional standards (such as ISLLC).
4. Programs formed collaborative re-

lationships, working with institutions in their region to provide a comprehensive and integrated experience for program participants. Collaborations helped to facilitate the placement of candidates as interns in local schools and encouraged university faculty to align coursework with internship activities.

5. Cohorts were not simply a way to group candidates, but used as a pedagogical tool to teach teamwork, develop a sense of community as learners, facilitate deep and durable peer support networks, and model distributed leadership.

6. Signature pedagogies (such as "Walk Throughs," problem-based learning, etc.) were similar across programs.

7. An intense focus on developing instructional leadership was maintained.

Program differences

There are several differences that distinguish these programs from each other. While programs use comparable rhetoric about instructional leadership, there are differences in how each program defines and develops professional skill in this

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area. There are also some philosophical differences between programs.

For example, some programs emphasize the development of individual principals as learners, while other programs focus more on the general principles of leadership and their intersection with the educational system as a whole. This influences whether the programs address the unique needs of individuals who aspire to be principals or whether programs are used as levers for district reform.

The preliminary findings from the Stanford School Leadership Study reveal some important and unanticipated issues

Are principals being prepared, and supported, to be both instructional leaders and building managers?

and questions. For example, although it is clear that state fiscal support and policy frameworks shape programs in a number of ways, state funding is not necessarily the only or even the primary support for leadership development. Foundations have also provided substantial support to the programs in our study. The long-term implications of using “soft money” to support leadership development will require further investigation.

In addition, the intense focus on developing instructional leaders represents a paradigm shift in the conception of the role of the principal and the structure of pre- and in-service programs, but what impact has this focus actually had in schools and districts? Are principals being prepared, and supported, to be both instructional leaders and building managers?

More importantly, if principals are expected to devote the bulk of their efforts on instructional leadership, who will perform the routine management and operational tasks of running a school? Will this become the primary domain of assistant principals, and if so, is this group being adequately groomed to assume leadership positions?

To date, the Stanford School Leader-

ship Study has contributed to the empirical literature on principal development in at least three fundamental ways. First, it supports and explains the importance of several popular ideas about — and practices used in — principal development (internships, cohort groups, university-school district collaboration, curricular coherence, focus on instructional leadership, state policy and fiscal support).

Second, it provides a useful framework for thinking about the components of effective principal development and their synergistic relationships.

And third, it raises new questions about the logic of principal development activities as they relate to the improvement of teaching and learning in schools. For example, just how do cohort structures and internships develop particu-

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lar leadership skills that in turn can be applied in practice to advance student achievement?

Although direct (or causal) relationships between the structures and activities of state fiscal and regulatory policies, the development of specific leadership competencies and improved teaching and learning may never be proved, a more thoughtful and rigorous analysis of

what is taught to aspiring school leaders and why will certainly contribute to the strength, integrity and relevance of principal development programs.

Stay tuned for the final report! ■

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