

Urban School District's Preparing New Principals Program 2008-2011: Perceptions of Program Completers, Supervising Principals, and Senior Level School District Administrators

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Rosemarye T. Taylor
University of Central Florida

Kelly Pelletier
Apopka Memorial Middle School

Todd Trimble
South Creek Middle School

Eddie Ruiz
North Springs Charter High School

The purpose of these three parallel mixed method studies was to measure the effectiveness of an urban school district's 2011 Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP). Results supported the premise that preparing principals for school leadership in 2013 must develop them as instructional leaders who can improve teacher performance and student achievement. The recommendations are useful to any school district or institution of higher education implementing leader preparation programs. Improvements to principal preparation programs supported by the results of these studies include a longer principal internship, a strong mentor relationship with an effective principal, a structured process of initial entry into the program, differentiated principal preparation experiences, and an increased focus on teacher effectiveness.

Introduction

Principal preparation has been the focus of criticisms that it is fraught with too much theory and too little practical application (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Darling-Hammond, La Pointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Principal leadership is essential to improving student learning (Hattie, 2009); therefore, alignment of principal preparation with standards to improve student learning outcomes is critical for effective principal preparation.

In the state of Florida there is a two-tiered approach to principal preparation which includes Level I educational leadership certification and Level II principal certification based on Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS). Level I certification is obtained through 21 state approved university programs and 1 school district approved program which makes an educator eligible for application to become an entry level administrator or assistant principal. Level II principal certification is provided by school districts or education agencies, the completion of which provides for eligibility to be a principal (SBE Rule 6A-5.081). Dissimilar from many other states, this two-step certification and principal preparation process is unique and extends the preparation time and experiences for candidates who wish to become principals. Even though Florida's process is unique, the implementation of a standards-based principal preparation program and analysis of perceptions of completers, principal supervisors, and senior level school district administrators is of interest to school districts and principal preparation programs nationally.

Three studies were undertaken with the purpose of determining the effectiveness of an urban school district's Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) in preparing assistant principals to be successful with the Florida Principal Leadership Standards adopted November 2011 (SBE Rule 6A-5.080). Perception of effectiveness was reported by program completers, supervising principals, and senior level school district administrators.

This article is based on three parallel mixed method studies including the perception of program completers from 2008-2011 (Pelletier, 2013), perceptions of principal supervisors of program completers 2008-2011 (Trimble, 2013), and perceptions of senior level school district administrators who were selected by the superintendent for participation (Ruiz, 2013). Study participants also offered recommendations for enhanced effectiveness of principal preparation. The overarching research question was:

To what extent do program completers (2008-2011), their supervising principals, and senior school district administrators perceive that the Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) prepares completers to be successful on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS) adopted November 2011?

Conceptual Framework

These research studies explored the concept of how to develop effective principal leadership behaviors conducive to increasing student achievement outcomes through a principal preparation program for assistant principals. In meta-analysis research on the influence of principals on student achievement outcomes, Hattie (2009) describes two types of principal leadership, instructional and transformational. The results of Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis support instructional leadership as having the greatest impact on student outcomes. Principals who are instructional leaders create safe learning climates, set clear instructional goals and maintain high expectations for both the teachers and students in their schools. Hattie (2009) reported common

dimensions of instructional leadership found in the research that had the greatest impact on student achievement to include: being committed to and participating with teachers in professional learning; organizing for the evaluation of teaching and curriculum; making strategic decisions for appropriate resources for instruction; setting clear expectations; and being sure that an environment conducive to learning is in place (pp.83-84). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) also researched the behavioral practices of effective principals and found similar practices to those discussed by Hattie (2009) as having the greatest impact on student achievement outcomes. The five most effective principal leadership practices as identified by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) include: the ability to read happenings in the school and use the information to address issues and problems; keeping the faculty current on educational theory and practice; involving teachers in all aspects of decision making; questioning the status quo and implementing change; and creating a culture of shared beliefs and a sense of community.

As noted by Reeves (2002) principal preparation programs are an investment in the future. Reeves (2004) also indicated that school districts need to develop recruitment programs and preparation programs that will create an unlimited supply of potential new principals, which is the purpose of the PNPP in the study school district. Building a successful principal preparation program includes components as defined by Reeves (2002): identifying prospective leaders; creating an educational leadership preparation program; supporting students, teachers, and parents through servant leadership; and creating synergy by blending leadership, learning and teaching.

Methods

Study participants included PNPP program completers 2008-2011, principal supervisors of these program completers, and senior level school district administrators. All were invited to complete the Preparing New Principals Program Completer Survey electronically and were reminded to do so four times after the initial invitation in line with procedures recommended by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009). Participants rated the preparation of the 2008-2011 completers to be successful on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS) adopted November 2011, which can be found by FPLS domain in Tables 2 through 5. The ratings were on a 5-point Likert scale of: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree.

Means, ranks, and standard deviations of each FPLS domain and individual FPLS within each domain were calculated for the three groups of participants. When the means were the same, both FPLS were given the same rank and then the next rank was skipped. For example, in Table 2 program completers' means were 3.88 for learning results evidenced by assessments and high expectations for growth in all students, resulting in the rank of two for both, and the next rank of four was student focused faculty system.

Participants were anonymous to protect the interests of the participants and researchers, who were principals in the same school district. Although the population was small and within one school district, the return rates were high (completers N=56, 62%; principal supervisors, N=36, 65%, senior level administrators N=23, 57%).

Qualitative data were obtained from two open-ended survey items and interviews of volunteers. The interview items invited the participants to share insights and recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of assistant principals' preparation. Krathwohl (2009) indicated that open-ended items and interviews are valid methods for obtaining rich information from participants. The open-ended survey items were analyzed by reading and re-reading using the

constant comparison method and identifying commonalities which were developed into themes. Eighteen interviews (six completers, six principal supervisors, and six senior level school district administrators) were recorded and transcribed, and then analyzed similarly to the open-ended survey items.

Findings

Overall, participants indicated that program completers were well prepared to successfully demonstrate the FPLS. Completers in schools with 50% or less free and reduced lunch students, as well as those in schools with 75% or more free and reduced lunch students, believed they were more prepared than those in schools with 51 to 74% free and reduced lunch students. Conversely, principal supervisors in schools with 75% or more free and reduce lunch believed that completers were less prepared to meet all four domains than their peer principal supervisors who served in more affluent schools. This difference in principals' perception of preparedness by percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch benefits may reflect differences in the skills needed in schools with varying demographics.

Completers perceived that they were slightly less well prepared to meet the FPLS than did their principal supervisors or senior level administrators. Instructional leadership was perceived by all participant groups to be the domain for which the completers were not as prepared, followed by student achievement. This is a valuable finding given that these are the two domains identified as most important by the superintendent. Ethical leadership was perceived by all participant groups as the domain for which completers were most well prepared. Table 1 displays the means on a 5-point scale, rank, and standard deviations with 95% confidence intervals for each FPLS domain and within each participant group. The standard deviations related to perceptions of senior level school district administrators show a greater variance in ratings than do those of the completers or of the principals.

Table 1
Perception of Completers' Preparation to Be Successful on 2011 FPLS: Within Group Means, Ranks, and Standard Deviations

FPLS Domain	Sr. Level District Administrators N=23	Principal Supervisors of Completers N=43	PNPP Completers 2008-2011 N=56
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Student Achievement	3.64 (1.02)	4.36 (0.76)	3.85 (0.67)
Instructional Leadership	3.52 (0.85)	4.25 (0.62)	3.77 (0.66)
Organizational Leadership	3.83 (0.59)	4.33 (0.52)	3.87 (0.64)
Professional/ Ethical Behaviors	3.88 (0.71)	4.40 (0.54)	3.93 (0.61)

Further analysis by domain revealed that participant groups' rankings of the six FPLS within the domain of student achievement were very close as shown in Table 2. Completers ranked their level of preparedness to be better than did the school district senior level administrators, but less than their supervising principals. The rank order by participant group was similar, even with the difference in perception of preparedness. Learning results evidenced by assessments is the item that varies and was ranked last or sixth by principals, but second in preparedness by completers and senior level school district administrators.

Standard deviations within the three groups varied also with the principal supervisors having the smallest range and the senior level school district administrators having the greatest range in the responses for each item. Given that the principal supervisors most closely observed the completers' expertise with understanding alignment of student learning experiences and outcome data, more experience for PNPP participants may be needed in this area.

Table 2

Within Group Means, Ranks, and Standard Deviations for Perceived Preparedness of Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) Completers' on the 2011 Florida Principal Leadership Standards: Domain Student Achievement

FPLS Descriptor	Senior Level School District Administrators N=23 <i>M (rank) SD</i>	Supervising Principals N=43 <i>M (rank) SD</i>	Program Completers N=56 <i>M (rank) SD</i>
Maintains school climate that supports student learning	3.87 (1) 1.10	4.50 (2) 0.77	3.91 (1) 0.71
Learning results evidenced by assessments	3.74 (2) 1.10	4.17 (6) 1.15	3.88 (2) 0.85
Generates high expectations for growth in all students	3.74 (3) 1.25	4.51 (1) 0.84	3.88 (2) 0.81
Enables faculty to work as a system focused on learning	3.70 (4) 1.15	4.47 (3) 0.67	3.86 (4) 0.70
Learning goals are based on state/district standards.	3.48 (5) 1.24	4.35 (4) 0.95	3.80 (5) 0.77
Engages faculty to close subgroup performance gaps	3.35 (6) 1.40	4.19 (5) 1.02	3.80 (5) 0.82

The FPLS domain of instructional leadership has 17 competencies which can be seen in Table 3, along with participant groups' means, ranks, and standard deviations. Similar to the domain of student achievement, the principal supervisors had higher mean rankings for the completers' preparedness than the completers, and the senior level school district administrators mean rankings were lower the other two groups. The senior level administrators also had greater standard deviations for the items indicating lack of agreement on the responses. Contrasts in perceptions of the groups can be seen in the ranks related to the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAP), which are the standards for teachers in the state, and engaging in faculty professional learning (completers' rank=16, 13; principal supervisors' rank=17, 11; senior level

school district administrators' rank=3, 4 respectively). Completers believe that they are much better equipped to use data to inform instructional decisions (rank=1) and to identify and address faculty instructional proficiency needs (3) than do their principal supervisors (rank=7, 16) or senior level school district administrators (rank=9, 15) suggesting that mentoring and support in these processes are needed.

Table 3

Within Group Means, Rank, and Standard Deviations for Perceived Preparedness of Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) Completers' on the 2011 Florida Principal Leadership Standards: Domain Instructional Leadership

FPLS Descriptor	Sr. Level School District Administrators N=23		Supervising Principals N=43		Program Completers N=56	
	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>
Communicate relationships among standards, instruction, and student performance	3.96 (1)	1.07	4.36 (5)	0.91	3.86 (2)	0.72
Uses diversity as an asset to improve student learning	3.87 (2)	1.01	4.43 (2)	0.51	3.77 (9)	0.93
Implements Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAP)	3.87 (3)	1.06	4.02 (17)	0.87	3.64 (16)	0.94
Engage faculty in professional learning	3.78 (4)	1.00	4.23 (11)	0.62	3.71 (13)	0.85
Safe, respectful, inclusive learning environment	3.78 (5)	1.09	4.43 (2)	0.84	3.80 (6)	0.90
Professional learning is linked to strategic objectives	3.65 (6)	1.07	4.28 (9)	0.76	3.80 (6)	0.81
Evaluates monitors, provides instructional feedback	3.65 (7)	1.03	4.35 (4)	0.66	3.80 (4)	0.75
Promotes valuing similarities and differences in students	3.61 (8)	1.08	4.50 (1)	0.51	3.82 (4)	0.90
Engages in data analysis for instructional planning and improvement	3.52 (9)	1.38	4.31 (7)	1.05	3.96 (1)	0.83
Employs instructionally proficient faculty	3.48 (10)	1.12	4.18 (5)	0.98	3.79 (8)	0.76
Implement culturally relevant instruction	3.35 (11)	1.30	4.10 (15)	0.87	3.75 (11)	0.84
Monitors/gives feedback related to quality learning environment	3.30 (12)	1.36	4.23 (11)	0.84	3.75 (11)	0.88
Initiates and supports continuous improvement	3.30 (13)	1.19	4.28 (9)	0.86	3.71 (13)	0.89
Implement curricula/standards w/rigor, relevance	3.30 (14)	1.26	4.29 (8)	0.84	3.82 (4)	0.88
Identify faculty instructional proficiency needs	3.26 (15)	1.18	4.05 (16)	1.01	3.84 (3)	0.68
Engages faculty in cultural and developmental issues related to student learning	3.13 (16)	1.22	4.21 (13)	0.87	3.70 (15)	1.01
Appropriate use of aligned assessments	2.96 (17)	1.07	4.15 (14)	0.89	3.64 (16)	0.84

Organizational leadership is a domain within which the three groups of participants perceived the completers' preparedness to be successful very differently as noted in Table 4. Supervising principals perceived that completers were better prepared than did the completers themselves, who perceived themselves better prepared than did the senior level school district administrators. Standards related to visibility, recognizing performance, and promoting collegiality ranked in the top 50% by all three groups. However, standards that might put the completer in the position to have challenging conversations with stakeholders or teachers (such as performance issues) were less highly ranked, and with which novice assistant principals have minimal experience and may need more to become successful principals. Also, the items related to succession planning and delegation had low ranks, which most probably is due to the lack of experience that novice administrators have with those standards. Responses within the three groups varied in the ranges with the senior school district administrators having more differences in responses than did the completers or the supervising principals.

Table 4

Within Group Means, Ranks, and Standard Deviations for Perceived Preparedness of Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) Completers' on the 2011 Florida Principal Leadership Standards: Domain Organizational Leadership

FPLS Descriptor	Sr. Level School District Administrators N=23		Supervising Principals N=39		Program Completers N=56	
	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (rank)	<i>SD</i>
Recognize individuals for effectiveness	4.13 (2)	0.55	4.57 (1)	0.65	4.00 (3)	0.83
Promote collegial school improvement and faculty development efforts.	4.04 (3)	0.77	4.51 (2)	0.51	3.84 (14)	0.80
Communicate expectations/performance information to stakeholders.	3.83 (13)	0.72	4.49 (3)	0.77	3.89 (10)	0.85
Listen, learn from all stakeholders.	3.87 (10)	0.92	4.42 (4)	0.77	3.98 (6)	0.77
Maintain visibility in school, community.	4.22 (1)	0.74	4.42 (4)	0.81	4.04 (2)	0.85
Establish appropriate deadlines for self and entire organization.	3.96 (4)	0.77	4.41 (6)	0.96	3.91 (9)	0.79
Empower others; distribute leadership.	3.70 (17)	1.02	4.38 (7)	0.72	3.96 (8)	0.76
Promote teacher-leadership functions.	3.96 (6)	0.85	4.38 (7)	0.64	3.71 (19)	0.85
Ensures faculty receive information about standards, requirements, decisions.	3.87 (10)	0.82	4.38 (7)	0.79	4.00 (3)	0.71
Use appropriate technologies for communication and collaboration.	3.61 (19)	1.20	4.36 (10)	0.80	3.89 (10)	0.85
Engage stakeholders in conversations about important school issues.	3.87 (10)	0.74	4.33 (11)	0.68	3.84 (14)	0.85
Develop relationships among stakeholders.	3.87 (10)	0.82	4.32 (12)	0.63	3.77 (18)	0.85
Is fiscally responsible in use of fiscal resources for instructional priorities.	3.91 (6)	0.85	4.32 (12)	0.71	3.75 (16)	0.84
Attends to decisions affecting student learning and teacher proficiency.	3.78 (14)	1.17	4.31 (14)	0.92	3.86 (13)	0.86
Has clear objectives and plans to organize time, tasks, and projects effectively.	3.74 (16)	1.01	4.27 (15)	1.02	3.95 (7)	0.72
Identify and cultivate potential leaders.	3.70 (19)	0.93	4.23 (16)	0.78	3.89 (10)	0.76
Provide evidence of delegation and trust in subordinate leaders.	3.91 (6)	0.90	4.23 (16)	0.81	3.77 (18)	0.83
Evaluate decisions; implement follow-up actions and revise as needed.	3.91 (6)	1.16	4.21 (18)	0.84	4.00 (3)	0.74
Use critical thinking and problem solving to define problems & identify solutions.	3.70 (17)	1.22	4.18 (19)	0.83	4.11 (1)	0.65
Use technology to enhance decision making and efficiency in the school.	3.61 (19)	1.20	4.15 (20)	0.93	3.64 (20)	0.90
Plan for succession management.	3.90 (21)	1.38	3.81 (21)	1.08	3.50 (21)	0.97

Demonstrating resiliency was the standard for which the participant groups perceived the completers to be less well prepared and was rated particularly low by the senior level school district administrators. Demonstrating willingness to admit errors and learn from mistakes was close in rank to demonstrating resiliency in perception of lack of preparedness by senior school district administrators. Resiliency and willingness to admit errors and learn from mistakes were viewed by the school district senior administrators as essential to face difficult challenges, strategize to overcome them, and improve student learning as a result; therefore, not letting setbacks or changes in context detract from the role of improving student learning. The others were ranked similarly high, such as adhering to the code of ethics and principles of professional conduct and commitment to student success. However, it should be noted that less of the principal supervisors responded to these items than for the previous domains.

By reviewing the standard deviations for indicators within each group of respondents the pattern of responses being close together is repeated by supervising principals and program completers. Senior level school district administrators have a larger standard deviation suggesting less agreement on the ratings for the completers on these indicators

Table 5

Within Group Means, Ranks, and Standard Deviations for Perceived Preparedness of Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP) Completers' on the 2011 Florida Principal Leadership Standards: Professional and Ethical Behaviors

FPLS Descriptor	Sr. Level Sch. District Admin. N=23 M (rank) SD	Supervising Principals N=37 M (rank) SD	Program Completers N=56 M(rank) SD
Adhere to Code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Conduct.	4.48 (1) 0.51	4.68 (1) 0.53	4.11 (1) 0.73
Demonstrate commitment to student success by identifying barriers.	3.91 (3) 0.87	4.51 (2) 0.65	3.84 (6) 0.91
Engage in professional learning to improve professional practice.	4.04 (2) 0.93	4.42 (3) 0.65	3.95 (2) 0.84
Demonstrate resiliency by maintaining focus on school vision.	3.30 (6) 1.26	4.41 (4) 0.50	3.89 (4) 0.87
Demonstrate explicit improvement in specific performance areas.	3.87 (4) 0.87	4.30 (5) 0.66	3.91 (3) 0.82
Demonstrate willingness to admit and learn from errors.	3.70 (5) 1.15	4.06 (6) 1.12	3.89 (4) 0.80

The qualitative data gathered from the open ended survey questions, as well as the interviews conducted with program completers (Pelletier, 2013), supervisors of the program completers (Trimble, 2013), and senior level school district administrators (Ruiz, 2013) complemented the findings of the survey results. Qualitative data supported the weakness in the instructional leadership domain, specifically the principal-mentor relationship. The survey participants commented on a need for feedback from mentors, sharing of professional

knowledge, practical on-the-job experiences, learning from principals with different leadership styles and opportunities to network with other leaders.

Discussion and Implications

Although the number of participants is small in this study, the return rate was high. Given that the study took place in one school district there were less intervening variables than there may have been if the study had taken place across school districts. Therefore, the insights may be helpful to others who provide principal preparation programs. Interestingly, the supervising principal of the assistant principal PNPP participants tended to rate the participant more highly than either the participant himself or the senior level school district administrator. Whether the higher ratings relate to the relationship developed over the time of the program or if it is due to actually having more first-hand knowledge of the participant's skills and knowledge than senior level school district administrators is unknown.

The small sample size and differences that have been noted raise the need for further investigation. Studies related to the extent to which the ratings of senior level school district administrators in large school districts are influenced by factors other than completers' skills and knowledge (student achievement or need for high performing leaders) or the extent to which the senior level school district administrators have knowledge of the participants would be prudent. Research on the extent to which the ratings of the supervising principals are influenced by personal professional relationships would be helpful to provide greater insight.

Recommendations that emerged from the three studies were drawn from the quantitative survey items, qualitative survey items, and interview items. These recommendations have implications for leadership preparation programs in higher education as well as those in the private sector, regional service centers, and within school districts. Principal preparation programs should target the most valued standards in a specific school district or state, while paying particular attention to the needs of administrators serving students in high poverty schools.

As supported by the literature (Hitt, Tucker, & Young, 2012; Mitgang, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2012) an extensive job-embedded internship that may last as long as a year can provide in-depth experience as long as there is quality feedback and mentoring. If the aspiring principal in this preparatory experience is treated as another assistant principal who gets consumed with the pace of the work, rather than as being immersed in a learning context, the results may not be positive in terms of explicit preparation to be a successful principal.

Mentorship by a highly effective principal is critical. Selection of highly effective principal coaches and mentors, who are not the participants' principal nor friend is recommended to address the interest in improving student learning and maximizing the investment in future school and school district leaders. Principal mentors, who may be recently retired effective principals or those from the local university, need preparation to be effective in that mentor role specific to principal preparation. Assuming that an effective principal will also be an effective mentor may be a fallacy.

Differentiation in principal preparation should be made based on an evaluation of knowledge, skills, experiences, and career goals of assistant principals. For example, there may be assistant principals who are not interested in becoming principals in the near future and need continued professional learning, but not to the extent of a principal preparation program. There may also be experienced administrators from other school districts or states who have great

expertise in some areas and may only need updating on elements specific to the state or to a specific school district.

In conclusion, preparation of assistant principals to be effective principals is a commitment that should not be taken lightly. The findings from this large PNPP program that prepares assistant principals to become effective principals can inform other programs. Whether in Florida, where there are two levels of educational leadership certification, or in a state that has one certification process for entry into school leadership, alignment with standards and needs of the local context is essential to prepare effective principals.

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