# An Assessment of the Recently Appointed Administrators' Program: Lessons Learned for Supporting New Principals[*]

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Abstract

New principals need support and assistance during the formative years of their careers. School districts can provide some level of support but there are organizations that offer programs to help new principals learn the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need in order to be successful on the job. One such program, The Recently Appointed Administrators Program, operates in Southwest Virginia as a cooperative venture between the Western Virginia Public Education Consortium (WVPEC) and Virginia Tech University. The program has received high ratings from past participants but program sponsors wanted more details about its strengths and limitations so they commissioned a comprehensive program evaluation. The results of this first assessment are outlined in this article along with recommendations that can be applied by coordinators of principal support programs in other locations for new principals. The article includes a brief overview of literature related to the learning and training needs of new principals. The bulk of the article is focused on the study methods, the results, and the lessons learned in the process to provide guidance for those charged with providing high quality programming for the support of new principals.
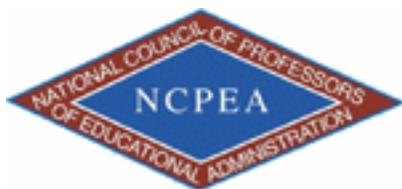
NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

An Increasing Number of New Principals

It's no secret that the ranks of experienced principals are getting smaller in the United States. Groff (2001) and Kerrins, Johnstone and Cushing (2001) point out the rising number of jobs compared to the

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shrinking number of experienced principals. As existing principals move closer to retirement, their jobs will need to be assumed by less experienced candidates. These new principals will need support and strategies in order to manage increasingly complex schools.

In schools where problems are becoming more complex, there may be little time to prepare or plan for the succession of new principals into leadership positions. Novice principals are typically placed in buildings and left to discover on their own how to lead, satisfy the needs of the community, and support their teachers and students. Some of these principals ascertain how to successfully navigate the environment but others flounder and even fail. New principals need support and guidance as they assume the role of school leader. In the article By the Numbers (2007), several important differences between veteran and novice principals were presented. It reported, "...half of up-and-coming principals work in schools that did not fully meet performance standards, compared with only 40% of veteran principals. And, 40% of newer principals work in majority poor schools, compared with 34% of veteran principals" (By the Numbers para. 7). Crow (2006) also points out the increasing complexity new principals are facing in today's schools. Schools are getting more complex and these complex situations are being handled more and more by novice principals. Many principal preparation programs are doing more to prepare these new principals for the increased challenges they will be facing but the needs of future school leaders will continue to grow as school become more complex.

The needs of new principals fit into several distinct areas. Daresh and Playko (1994) identified three classifications of learning needs related to leadership skills important to new principals. They provide the following classifications and definitions from one of their studies of the topic "...beginning principals' concerns were in three areas: problems with role clarification... limitations on technical expertise... and difficulties with socialization to the profession and to individual school systems..." (p. 36).

Daresh and Playko also found differences in the expressed needs of aspiring and practicing principals that relate well to new principals. These results are summarized in figure 1.1

Figure 1.1 Daresh and Playko's Aspiring and Practicing Principals' Ranking of Important Developmental Areas

Category	Practicing PrincipalsRanking Related to Importance	Aspiring PrincipalsRanking Related to Importance
Technical SkillsSocialization SkillsSelf-awareness (role clarification) Skills	312	123

Table 1

(Daresh and Playko p. 39)

Since aspiring principals in principal preparation programs have a need for instruction related to the more technical aspects of the job, while principals on the job report that they need more instruction related to the socialization and role clarification aspects of the position, it can't be assumed that existing principal preparation programs will provide adequate experiences for these new principals. Many new principals will need to take advantage of on-the-job support programs offered by outside agencies. These programs will need to focus on the skills that will help make these new principals successful. Walker and Carr-Stewart (2006) Fleck (2006), Gomez and Van Zant (2006) all point out the importance of the understanding and the application of role clarification, building relationships, and socialization for new principals. These skills should make up a significant part of the curriculum of the programs designed to support new principals. Walker and Qian (2006) also address the need for an emphasis on socialization and self-awareness in programs designed for new principals. The development of socialization and role clarification skills helps new principals as they define their values and in determining how they will work with their school community. Clearly, the mastery of role clarification and socialization is much more complicated than just following a written set of technical standards such as provided in many state licensure requirements. The application of advanced

skills related to socialization and role clarification require reflection and connection to the new principal's personal and professional frames of reference. Once new principals are able to understand the technical skills of the principalship and fit them into their professional frame of reference, they will be better able to use them in their operation of the school. The meaning-making and personalization of skills to the job assignment is crucial to a new principal's success.

Program Structural Needs and Learning Opportunities for New Principals

School principals can be a unique and challenging group to teach in professional development settings. Barth (1985) pointed out the unique developmental challenges principals pose for staff developers when he stated that they "build up antibodies" (p.156) toward training efforts. It's no secret that some principals resist training and development. Some of this resistance to training may be due to the fact that principals are used to focusing scarce resources on their teachers who have a direct impact on their achievement of the students. They may not be accustomed to spending money and time on their own learning. Others may see training as a loss of time that could be used to catch up on needed tasks such as paperwork and reports. Principals are accustomed to leading rather than being led. It may be hard for principals to take direction in a workshop or seminar setting. Even new or novice principals have had a taste of leading before attending a new principal support program session and may not want to be directed in a workshop setting. The unique aspects of principals, their job assignments, and their character need to be taken into account when planning their support programs.

Several authors advocate a multifaceted approach in new principal support programs. Walker and Qian (2005) state, "...research holds strongly that beginning principals continue to learn through multiple pathways, such as reading, attending professional meetings, and conversing with professional friends..."(p. 303). This view is shared by Crippen (2004) who points out the need for support programs for new principals containing a diversity of learning options to include strategies such as mentoring, reflective writing, membership in professional organizations, and attendance at meetings of veteran principals. These multiple pathways to learning not only make programs more interesting but assist new principals in developing the mental frames of reference needed to make their own personal and professional changes.

Petzko (2004), Rich and Jackson (2005), and Browne-Ferrigno & Muth (2004) discuss the importance of professional networking and building meaning through discussion and dialog. This understanding moves principal development beyond the normal lecture and technical skill development normally experienced by aspiring principal candidates. The wide needs of principals can be addressed by helping them build their own reflective frames of reference to draw upon when leading their building. The aspect of building-level leadership is so contextual in nature that two neighboring schools may need entirely different leadership in order to be successful. A more responsive instructional model is needed for existing principals that is tailored to their unique skills and needs.

Summary

The scope of leadership is changing both in complexity and in the type of new principals being called to lead. As these new principals assume leadership, they need support and instruction in a variety of knowledge and strategies in order to be successful. Building on the technical skill base many have developed during their time in principal preparation programs, new principals need opportunities to learn how to assess the match between the strengths of the school community and their own leadership strategies. They also need support from programs designed specifically for them that include a variety of opportunities to learn from other new colleagues and experienced principals. These programs should be multifaceted and contain opportunities for reflection and building their own frames of reference using a variety of instructional methods including inquiry, dialog with colleagues, case study analysis, and other active learning strategies to have a positive impact on these principals.

Overview of the Recently Appointed Administrators Program

The Recently Appointed Administrators Program is a collaborative effort between The Western Virginia Public Education Consortium (WVPEC) and the Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement (COTA) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Four $2\frac{1}{2}$ day sessions are held on a quarterly basis each year, starting on Wednesday evenings and ending early in the afternoon on the following Friday. The program utilizes instruction from leaders in the field, interactive opportunities between participants,

discussion of reading materials, and connections with a mentor.

Program Evaluation Methods

The study of the Recently Appointed Administrators Program was conducted from May through October of 2007. Program data were gathered using a questionnaire, focus group sessions (each conducted with about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the participant group), program session agendas, training materials, participant session feedback forms, and participant reflective writing samples. These data were initially sorted into the categories of knowledge, skills, and applications. Program supervisors said that since they had not informed participants about the possibility of a program assessment being conducted when they initially signed up for and completed the program follow-up site visits, supervisor and faculty perceptions of performance, and other performance data related to program participants was not gathered. In future program evaluations these data sources may be utilized to provide more detailed information about the application of program content at the building level.

Data were analyzed related to the major themes of the program and sorted into the categories of knowledge, skills, and applications participants gained from the sessions. The study/evaluation was also designed to examine the relationship between the planned, delivered, and applied curricula. This examination enabled the researchers to study what participants reported they were able to actually use from their experiences back at their school sites.

Data were also plotted related to Daresh and Playko's (1994) three major learning areas related to the needs of practicing principals. These are:

- Role clarification (who these people are as principals and how they should use their new power)
- Technical expertise (how to do what they are supposed to do according to their job description)
- Socialization issues (fitting their leadership skill set into a particular setting/assignment)

Specific Participant Program Feedback

Program Strengths

Participants were asked to respond to questionnaires that addressed their learning and experiences in the program. Once these forms were completed, focus group sessions were held to give participants a chance to discuss their experiences in the program. The major strength areas of the program identified in these processes are listed here:

- Collegial and Networking-The collegial and networking aspects of the program were identified as major areas of strength by participants. In addition to meeting and talking with other principals, participants reported benefit in discovering colleagues that struggled with similar problems and who could help generate solutions to issues they faced.
- Guest Speakers and Presenters-Program guest speakers and presenters were seen as another area of strength. Comments highlighted presenter preparation, credibility, clarity, and a focus on practical information during sessions.
- Learning Atmosphere-Participants liked the positive learning atmosphere established and maintained in the program and how it impacted their professional learning.
- Technical Skill Development-Specific technical content provided in the sessions was related to issues that these new principals faced such as teacher evaluation, data driven decision making, school safety and emergency preparedness, and compliance with state and national regulations.
- Active Learning-Group role playing and interaction sessions related to content were helpful and necessary for success. Participants commented that role playing helped them implement ideas from the seminars back at their schools.
- Socialization and Role Clarification-Participants reported that areas that related to understanding and working with staff members, clarifying their role as a leader, attaining and maintaining balance, and delegation and involvement were among the most important but unexpected outcomes of the program. They reported that this knowledge helped them back at their buildings even more than some of the technical skills they learned in the program.

Participant Questionnaire Comments Related to Program Strengths Classified According New Principal Need Areas

Participant written responses on questionnaires administered prior to the focus group meetings were classified in relation to Daresh and Playko's (2000) need areas. The results of this classification is included in figure 1.2

Figure 1.2 Focus Group Written Comments Based on the Daresh's Need and Potential Use Levels

	Socialization	Role Clarification	Technical
Content Knowledge	6	6	7
Skills	2	6	18
Applications	17	7	17
Totals	25	19	41

Table 2

Figure 1.2 shows the number of participant responses only and their classification in the categories of socialization, role clarification, and technical skills. The area containing the most participant comments was the technical skills area. Participants identified that more technical skill related content was provided than skills in the areas of socialization and role clarification.

Participant Focus Group Comments Related to Program Strengths Classified According to New Principal Need Areas

Focus group verbal comments were also classified in relation to Daresh and Playko's need areas. The results of this classification is included in figure 1.3

Figure 1.3 Focus Group Verbal Comments Based on the Daresh's Need and Potential Use Levels

	Socialization	Role Clarification	Technical
Content Knowledge	6	6	8
Skills	3	4	10
Applications	3	5	8
Totals	12	15	26

Table 3

Figure 1.3 shows the number of participant responses gathered during focus group sessions. The comments were classified into the categories of socialization, role clarification, and technical skills. A majority of the positive comments shared by participants in the focus groups were related to technical skills that were a part of the program.

Training materials and session agenda topics were analyzed according to need areas. The results of this analysis are included in figure 1.4

Figure 1.4 Program Content Themes Plotted in Relation to Socialization, Role Clarification, and Technical Skills

Socialization	Role Clarification	Technical
Building RelationshipsBuilding healthy relationshipsLeadership (site specific) (2 subtopics)	StandardsISLLC standards for principalsLeadership (4 subtopics)Maintaining Balance (2 subtopics)	Legal Issues (2 subtopics)IDEA/special education (4 subtopics)Data (9 subtopics)Teacher Evaluation (3 subtopics)Public Relations (1 subtopic)
3 Main topics2 Subtopics	4 Main topics6 Subtopics	5 Main topics19 Subtopics

Table 4

Figure 1.4 shows the major program themes and subtopics gathered through a review of training materials used in the program. A majority of the content appears to be focused in the technical skill area.

Participant Recommendations for Program Refinement

In the questionnaires administered to participants and the focus group meetings held to assess the program, participants were asked to share their recommendations regarding areas of refinement for future programming. The following areas were most frequently identified in these two processes:

- Increase informal networking and problem solving opportunities-Participants said they would have liked to have less time structured for them and more unstructured time scheduled to be used for discussion, informal problem solving, and networking.
- Encourage More Technology Use in Conjunction with the Program-Participants said it would have helped them learn more if there was more of an emphasis on the use of technology to support them in the program. They recommended the development of a website for the program where instructional materials and assignments could be stored. Laptop computers could then be used in sessions rather than paper copies as presenters shared their content. They also recommended that the website allow previous graduates of the program to have access to program materials and resources. In addition, a listing of previous participants should be kept so current participants could contact them for clarification and mentoring opportunities.
- Clear Presenter Guidance and Expectations-Participants said that program presenters were inconsistent in the time and the amount of support material they devoted to their particular content areas. Some of the presenters did not stay within agenda time guidelines and took time away from other presenters. Participants said the program would be improved by setting common standards for all session presenters.
- Focus on Role Clarification and Socialization Strategies Early in the Program-Participants overwhelmingly reported that the most beneficial parts of the program content involved understanding and working with people in their building (socialization). Another very beneficial skill identified by participants involved understanding their role as the building principal and establishing and maintaining balance between their professional and personal lives (role clarification). These content areas were discussed near the end of the program. Participants said they would have benefitted from learning about these crucial areas much earlier in the program.

Lessons Learned: Future Plans for the Recently Appointed Administrators Program

Since this is the first year of comprehensive program assessment, sponsors are interested in conducting yearly assessments to build a more complete picture of the program's long-term impact. Yearly assessments are being planned to help accomplish this goal. In preparing for this type of long-term assessment, several program adjustments need to be put into place to help establish consistency. The following refinements are planned for future programs to improve the reliability of the assessment process:

- A move to outcome-based program and agenda development-In this assessment it was apparent that sessions were content/topic driven rather than outcome driven. Clear, outcome-based objectives based

on knowledge, skills, and applications will be developed for the program. These objectives should be used to drive the development of materials, content presentations, agendas, and program measurement tools. Participants will be made aware of these outcomes at the beginning of each session. These outcomes will be classified into the areas of technical skills, role clarification, or socialization.

- Increased material and presentation guidance- The quality and length of the materials provided by presenters proved inconsistent in the program. Some presenters provided extensive but seemingly irrelevant material for short sessions while other presenters with more agenda time provided minimal materials. Future presenters and resource people will be provided clear guidelines to assist them in the development of their session content and learning materials. These guidelines will include material length and type, a focus on session outcomes, and application assignments for participants. In addition to providing a road map for implementation, this clarity will raise the expectations that the knowledge and skills learned in the program will be applied by program participants.
- The use of consistent and more comprehensive session feedback forms-Three different evaluation forms were used in the program. Consistent feedback forms will be developed and used in future program sessions. Many of the questions on the evaluation forms were either general in nature or related to perceptions of the learning environment. Future feedback forms will be redesigned to gather information related to the application of program information. Feedback will also be gathered related to the categories of socialization, role clarification, and technical applications. By making the feedback forms more specific, program staff will be able to better understand what participants claim they are applying from their experience and raise the expectation that participants will focus on using program strategies in their schools.

Lessons Learned: Recommendations for those charged with the development and implementation of programs designed to support new principals

An ongoing area of need in the future will be the induction and support of new principals to the profession. There are important lessons learned from this program evaluation that may be of benefit to others who are planning programs designed to support new or existing principals. The following recommendations are offered:

- Early introduction of content related to socialization and role clarification- Session planners charged with developing and implementing support programs for new principals should provide clear information and strategies related to understanding and working with school staff/community members (socialization) and how to strike a balance between the personal and professional demands (role clarification) placed on new principals early in the program. The themes of socialization, role clarification, and technical skills advocated by Daresh (1994) should be considered organizational frameworks for new principal support programs.
- The importance of participant understanding of the concepts of knowledge, skills, and applications- Because new principals are on such a steep learning curve, program organizers should label program content as knowledge, skill, or applications. If new principals know they are expected to actually apply a concept learned in the program at their school, their chance of success will be increased. By labeling content levels and sharing expectations for its use, program organizers can provide a road map for their new principals to follow.
- Look for opportunities for informal participant networking- In an effort to make sure the training is helpful to participants, session planners may be tempted to "over plan" and fill up every available minute during the training with content and activities. Participants may desire to engage in some informal networking. Session planners should provide time for this important activity and even inform participants of the need to develop informal networks.
- Provide participants with feedback related to the application of program skills- Principal support program organizers should develop session feedback forms that move beyond gathering information related to the feel of the workshop or the quality of the food and facilities. It is crucial to ask participants to provide information related to their ability to use and apply program content. If

program coordinators gather ongoing data related to application efforts back at the building, they can provide coaching and guidance to increase the success of program participants.

- Provide clear guidance for session presenters in the development of their session content and handouts- By providing clear and specific guidance to resource people and presenters, program organizers increase the chances that principals will be able to understand and apply what they are learning in the sessions at their schools. This guidance should include presentation timelines and implementation and follow-up strategies to be included in their training materials and be based on session and program outcomes.

Summary

As principals continue to retire or move out of the profession, new principals that are hired to take their places will need support and guidance in order to be successful. The demand for programs charged with this support will increase over time. As new principal support program planners take on the challenges of providing guidance for these new principals the use of the lessons learned during the first assessment of the Recently Appointed Administrators Program may prove fruitful in helping to pass the leadership torch from the present principals to the new generation of leaders assuming the increasingly complex job of school administrators.

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