

Can Grow Your Own Approaches Solve the Wicked Problem of Filling Rural Superintendencies With Highly Qualified Administrators: Stakeholders Speak Out

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about a strong positive correlation between leadership and student success (Wood et al., 2013) coupled with community input around hiring from outside an organization, as opposed to hiring from within, contributes to the complexity of filling superintendent vacancies. The limited research available on this issue is amplified due to the concern around the shortage of highly qualified superintendent candidates available to fill those top roles (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014).

The role of district superintendent can be cumbersome, yet, it can be a role worth pursuing. The information gathered for this ethnographic study was derived from the responses from various stakeholders' opinions, feelings, and experiences as they related to the superintendent position and 'grow your own' hiring practices in rural districts. This study revealed there are both advantages and disadvantages to implementing the GYO approach. Limiting the pool of qualified applicants, and contributing to gender-bias in candidate selection were challenges shared by the participants while the building of a culture of leadership and shortening the learning curve were identified as advantages of a GYO hiring approach.

Keywords: grow your own, gender stratification, leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Securing and retaining high-quality educators and administrators for rural districts is challenging (Hayes et al., 2021). Corbett and Tinkham (2014) noted multiple “wicked problems” faced by rural schools, and in fact, finding strong leadership might be the most “wicked” of all given the significance and impact leadership can play. Moreover, research provides evidence that there tends to be more superintendent turnover in rural school districts in comparison to others (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Therefore, GYO programs have been proffered as one viable approach for facilitating continuity in rural school leadership given the unique nature and needs of these communities (Rey, 2014); however, there are downsides connected to GYO as well.

The multi-dimensional role of the school superintendent often serves simultaneously as teacher-scholar, instructional leader, business manager, political leader and even applied social scientist (Bjork et al., 2014; Heron, 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2013). Securing and retaining high-quality educators and administrators for rural districts is challenging (Hayes et al., 2021). Moreover, research provides evidence that there tends to be more superintendent turnover in rural school districts in comparison to others (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Andersen, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Jong (2017) proffers that in the complexity of their role as public leaders, school superintendents, are often called upon to serve as mourner-in-chief, orchestrator, buddy, and, advocate. In consideration of this complexity, search firms often create a contextual community profile to further define expectations when hiring school superintendents (Benigni et al., 2020). Concerns about a strong positive correlation between leadership and student success (Wood et al., 2013) coupled with community input around hiring from outside an organization, or hiring from within add to the intricacy of the process.

While many scholars value the advantages of hiring candidates from within the current employee applicant pool (Hammer et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013), there are still those who contest the idea of hiring from within the district (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). Although some scholars challenge the notion of hiring from within, a number of school districts have begun filling leadership vacancies via ‘grow your own’ (GYO) programs or leadership approach (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammer et al., 2005; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Through grooming and honing the leadership skills of existing employees to develop future school leaders, as positions become available, onboarding downtime is diminished via access to this internal leadership pipeline. According to Rey (2014), GYO programs are one viable approach for facilitating continuity in rural school leadership given the unique nature and needs of these communities; however, there are considerations and challenges as noted that must be taken into account.

ACADEMIC RATIONALE

When it comes to filling administrator leadership vacancies in rural school settings, research has confirmed that urban districts frequently implement a standard succession plan for selecting an applicant for an administrative position, versus smaller rural districts that do not implement such succession plans (Zepeda et al., 2012).

Grow Your Own

Rural school districts are joining urban and suburban districts in implementing ‘grow your own’ leadership approaches from which to select administrative candidates, including superintendents, when vacancies arise (Versland, 2013). The practice of “growing their own,” has been illuminated by several scholars (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Rey (2014) for example, asserted that there are often unique demographics in rural communities that can impact GYO efforts. For instance, research affirms in rural communities about half of the population are from low-income families, mobile, with one-fourth of the population being students of color (Showalter et al., 2017). These multiple variables impact the potential pool of interested superintendent applicants. Additionally, these remote locations often have limited amenities compared to those that suburban and urban districts offer. Fiscal concerns related to historical enrollment challenges in rural districts as well these and a multitude of other complexity factors, influence many rural districts to opt to “grow their own” future leaders (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). One benefit of home-grown candidates includes rural school districts creating opportunities to increase leadership retention by reducing the turn-over rates of school administrators (Hammer et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2013).

On the other hand, there are challenges to GYO programs and approaches, including limited availability of quality mentors for future leaders, especially in rural districts. Scholars have contested the practice of GYO. Gronn and Lacey (2006) noted that limiting superintendent hires to internal candidates can negatively impact the school organization. Moreover, external applicants who may be well-qualified to address the needs of the school district could be overlooked due to the practice of only hiring internal candidates. GYO processes may be attributed to the organization's culture of past practices in hiring internal candidates to fill the open positions (Buckman et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2014). Concerns related to hiring from within an organization and selecting an internal applicant for the superintendent role include selection based on intuition and favoritism (Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). Additionally, while practices such as using existing previous relationships through various networks (Doyle et al., 2014) can be beneficial and enhance the known aspects of a candidate, this networking, as well as leadership hand-selecting through a process, known as “*tapping*,” can also be detrimental in limiting the pool of available candidates (Myung et al., 2011). To elaborate, the research describes the trend of *tapping* in the selection of administrative candidates as those who are selected by a previous administrator for a vacant position (Myung et al., 2011). Ultimately, such strategies may cause leaders to be closed-minded when it comes to searching for sorely needed leadership and aptitude but restricting searches to their own often limited, small, pool of employees. (McPhail, 2014).

When it comes to the recruitment and selection process of superintendents, one must assess the current hiring procedures, and whether it entails a succession plan of hiring internal applicants. Unfortunately, rural school districts receive few applications for leadership positions (Pijanowski et al., 2009) and this is problematic for the hiring of superintendents. An additional contributing factor surrounding the difficulty of filling these leadership roles may be the history of superintendent turnover in particular rural districts (Alsbury, 2008; Melia, 2016; Orr, 2006). Alsbury (2008) also cites additional contributing factors including low pay and the revolving door of superintendents with rural districts’ reputations being stepping stones for career

advancement. Rey (2014), however, asserts that another compounding factor is that the superintendent candidates that are applying are not adequately prepared for the role.

There remains a need for a critical leadership in place within rural school districts (Budge, 2006). Some rural school districts have chosen to select to “grow their own” candidates to ascend to the top leadership role (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Hammer et al., 2005; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013). Lamkin (2006) does stress the importance of adequate training, as she identifies six areas of inadequate training in relation to the challenges of the superintendent role, especially those superintendents in rural school districts. These six areas include inadequate training in school law, school finances, personnel management, state and federal regulations, local district and board policies, and technology. A noted finding reveals that superintendents did not view technology as a persistent challenge, rather it is viewed as a recent obstacle (Lamkin, 2006). Therefore, these findings suggest a rural superintendent must be well-versed in multiple areas in order to be relieved of some stress from challenges.

Defining Rural

According to the AASA (2017), 72% of the United States landmass is considered rural country. Additionally, AASA asserts 53% of the United States schools are rural school districts, of which 20% of the student population attend these schools. Ratcliffe et al. (2016) wrote a brief on defining ‘rural’ at the U.S. Census Bureau. The authors identified three major characteristics used for distinguishing rural populations. They take into consideration population density, sparsity, and at a distance (as opposed to close together). Showalter et al. (2017) describe how these rural school districts face unique challenges. The researchers affirm about half of the student population in rural schools are from low-income families, has moved within the past year, and more than one-fourth is a student of color.

While a number of scholars and geographers have sought to define rurality, one definition fitting for this study emerged in 2019, when the 86th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3, including allowance for a teacher incentive allotment. According to Texas Education Code (TEC) Section 48.112, campuses will be able to qualify for the teacher incentive allotment when they meet the "rural campus" classification of being:

located in: (A) an area that is not designated as an urbanized area or an urban cluster by the United States Census Bureau; and (B) a school district with fewer than 5,000 enrolled students; or (2) designated as a rural campus under rules adopted by the commissioner (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Thus, for the purposes of this research study, use of the term, rural, will utilize this TEC definition acknowledging that perceptions of stakeholders in rural districts of 500 may vary from the perceptions of stakeholders in districts of 5,000. Additionally, the Office of Management and Budget (2000) has further identified categories within the overarching *rural* definition. Table 1 identifies the three *rural categories* and provides a description for each.

Table 1
Rural Categories

Category	Definition
Rural Fringe	Defined by the census as a ‘rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.’
Rural Distant	Described by the census as ‘rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.’
Rural Remote	Defined as ‘rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.’

Gendered Nature of the Superintendency

Of equal importance in the research findings is the uncovering of the social justice aspect in leadership roles. This includes reviewing the literature on the superintendency known to historically be a male-dominated field (David & Bowers, 2018) and how that bias further restricts viable candidates for superintendent pools. An examination of the historically gendered nature of the superintendency will be explored, discussed, and problematized similarly to Blackmore (2013) who noted that, “A feminist critical sociological perspective treats leadership as a conceptual lens through which to problematize the nature, purpose, and capacities of educational systems . . . and to re-think their practices in more socially just ways” (p. 139).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Superintendents have been historically recruited to fill these leadership positions in rural school districts, and all school districts inequitably (Allred et al., 2017). Amplifying that problem is that rurality itself is a contested term (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008) and the challenges of rural school districts are numerous (Lamkin, 2006; Wood et al., 2013). Addressing the challenges of rural districts such as lack of private life, being the sole administrator, and often the target of public criticism (Lamkin, 2006) requires unique leadership and particularly in South Texas, leadership that understands those unique needs. Some scholars have explored the benefits of the practice of GYO (Hammer et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013), while yet others have problematized the practice of GYO (Doyle et al., 2014; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). This study expects to contribute to the research literature by illuminating the perceptions of stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages and problematic implications of grow-your-own superintendent hiring practices.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to potentially problematize the verbiage of GYO regarding whether it is indeed a formalized strategy or a means of gender stratification or marginalization in hiring practices for these positions, which are limiting superintendent hiring pools. To elaborate further, his study sought to identify whether there is a social injustice when it comes to hiring, or interviewing, female applicants through gleaning the perceptions of various stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents from rural school districts with regard to their perception around “grow your own” hiring practices. By listening well to the stories of the participants, data emerged allowing the researcher to ascertain: 1) whether participants were familiar with GYO programs or leadership approaches; 2) where appropriate, had experienced an internal promotion themselves; and, 3) what their perceptions were of GYO approaches to superintendent hires (internal promotion). Contributing factors that potentially impact the benefit of such practices were explored to examine both the positive as well as the negative impacts of hiring “from within”, as well as implications for the long-term success of rural school districts. Additionally, this study sought to identify where the advantages outweighed the challenges when it comes to implementing a GYO approach through hiring internally.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The following research question guided this study:

What are the perceptions of stakeholders, including principals, superintendents, and school board presidents, about the benefits as well as challenges presented by “grow-your-own” approaches to fill rural superintendent positions?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Grow your own (GYO) the practice of growing your own future leaders from within the same organization scholars (Hammer, et al., 2005; Versland, 2013; Wood et al., 2013).

Rural is defined as a district located in: (A) an area that is not designated as an urbanized area or an urban cluster by the United States Census Bureau; and (B) a school district with fewer than 5,000 enrolled students; or (2) designated as a rural campus under rules adopted by the commissioner (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Rural is also defined as (1) of, relating to, or characteristic of the country, country life, or country people; rustic; (2) living in the country; or (3) of or relating to agriculture (Dictionary; n.d.).

Rural Fringe is census-defined as rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

Rural Distant is census-defined as rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

Rural Remote is census-defined as rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Office of Management and Budget, 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Marshall and Rossman (2016) asserted, “Qualitative research takes place in the natural world” (p. 3). Investigators conducting qualitative research study humans, including behavior and interactions, in real-world social settings. This research study also took place in the natural real-world setting and is described in detail below under *site selection*. To be a qualitative researcher in a natural setting means “Observing social life as it unfolds is the stock-in-trade of the ethnographer” (Saldana, 2015, p. 126). This naturalistic inquiry sought to obtain the perceptions of various South Texas rural campus principals, superintendents, and school board presidents with regard to their perception of “grow your own” hiring practices. The interviews were conducted individually and in person at a site suggested by the participant to ensure their comfort and willingness to share their perspective on the topic (Patton, 2015).

Perspective

“Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: to *explore*, *explain*, or *describe* a phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 75). In order for the qualitative researcher to gain a clear holistic perspective, she needs to gather data from multiple sources and literature. Saldana (2016) advises, “Transcend the local and particular of your study, and reflect on how your observations may apply to other populations, to the bigger picture, to the generalizable, even to the universal” (p. 49).

This research study consisted of nine individual interviews which all took place in a natural setting. The researcher has chosen to identify the primary data gathering instrument as self (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allows for a better appreciation and understanding of each of the participant’s life experiences (Saldana, 2016) and human appreciation for the data. As the main instrument for gathering data, the researcher was afforded the opportunity for collecting real and natural observations, including behavioral, in the field. The researcher was able to gather rich data from the participants through story-telling about their perceptions of GYO programs or approaches. In addition, the analysis of discourse provided a depth of data when identifying the major emergent themes.

Participants and Sampling

The participants included three (3) principals, three (3) superintendents, and three (3) school board presidents. An equitable representation of participants from all sizes of rural school districts (including fringe, remote, and distant) was sought. Additionally, all participants are educational leaders in some capacity in those districts, as they are members of the rural educational community. Efforts were made to include a variety of genders, as well as ethnically diverse participants. The sampling was initially purposeful in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40) resulting in three of the participants being selected in this manner. These initial participants were selected by researching the Texas Education Agency’s website and locating and downloading the ‘district type’ file. This file provides the names of all districts in the state of Texas, as well as categorizes the districts by rural remote, rural fringe, rural distant, as well as city, suburb, or town.

After identifying possible initial rural districts, the researcher called a principal, a superintendent, and a school board president by locating the contact information from the

identified school district's website. Additional participants were secured via snowballing technique to identify additional participants beyond the initial purposeful sample (Patton, 2015). Of the nine participants, thus, three were purposefully selected and six were recommended via snowball sampling and then interviewed per their consent. Analyzing the participants further, it is determined that of the nine participants, six were located in a rural fringe area, one was located in a rural remote area, and two were located in a rural distant area. Additionally, the request for participation in this study was declined by potential participants who were recommended by a colleague in the same subgroup. After the initial conversation between the lead researcher and 12 potential participants, several superintendents and school board presidents declined to participate; including five superintendents and seven school board presidents. Significantly, while many of these recommended superintendents and school board presidents stated they were interested in the findings, they apologized that they would not be willing to participate. In other words, by opting out, these participants essentially chose to remain *silent* on this topic of "grow your own."

Data Analysis and Ethics

The data was initially organized by question and participant responses. Data was inputted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for easier sorting of the data. The spreadsheet was designed to allow for the entry of the question, interviewee, response, and identified theme. After all the data was entered in the spreadsheet, each response entry was reviewed and coded for the keywords or short phrases. Included in the verbatim transcribed responses, were the notations of pauses, body language, silence, and change of tone when the participants were speaking. These added observations aided in creating a theme for the response to a question. All participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity.

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility and control researcher bias were implemented (Erlandson et al., 1993). Further, pseudonyms were implemented to protect the identity of all participants, as well as their districts. Additionally, the integrity of the research study was maintained at all times using a feminist ethic of care approach (Noddings, 1992) as well as ensuring the ethical treatment of participants throughout the study.

RESULTS

'Grow Your Own' Approaches Among Rural Districts

Eight of the nine participants each had some personal experiences with GYO hiring practices. Table 2 shows a brief overview of the participants and their experiences.

Table 2
Participant Personal Experience with GYO Hiring Practices

Pseudonym	Personal Experience with GYO Hiring Practices
<i>Principal</i>	
Karen	N/A
Liz	Product of GYO
Sean	Product of GYO
<i>Superintendent</i>	
Toby	Product of GYO
Bill	Considers internal hires first
Mike	Product of GYO
<i>Board President</i>	
Leanne	Superintendent is a GYO; Superintendent is mentoring others, this offers a pool of qualified applicants
Fred	School board prefers to hire outside the district; prefers a large pool of applicants
Joe	District believes in, and practices, mentoring and GYO

Familiarity with GYO Term

The intention of this study was to identify whether GYO was a formalized process implemented or a means of gender stratification and even marginalization in the hiring practices for superintendent vacancies. To explore this further, each participant was asked whether he or she had any familiarity with the ‘GYO’ term and process. Sample responses are included here.

Karen had not had personal experience, nor observed the GYO practice in her district, yet she is somewhat familiar with the term as she responded, “Yes, I know what it is. It is when teachers are selected to be mentored to become leaders or administrators.” While Karen does not have experience with a ‘GYO’ program or approach, Sean expressed he had a one-time experience with his previous administrator, and mentor, who encouraged him to go into school administration while he was a classroom teacher. Sean mentioned he felt confident to enter the administrative leadership program with the support of his supervisor and mentor. Liz, on the other hand, had multiple personal experiences with the GYO process. She describes her recollection:

I have experienced it [GYO] quite a few times. I was a teacher who was promoted to counselor in my same district. Then, after several conversations with my principal about continued education, I was persuaded . . . he calls it ‘encouraged’ . . . to look into the principal certification. After several inquiries, I did. I looked into it and then completed the program and obtained the certification. I was surprised when an opening came up for an assistant principal I was asked if I wanted it. Of course, I said, ‘YES.’ I didn’t even complete an application or interview.

Advantages of Hiring Internal Applicants

The theme of *advantages of hiring internal applicants* was also remarkably present. The question was posed to each participant if they believed internal candidates had an advantage during the hiring process. It was interesting that the superintendent subgroup had more to share on this topic, as opposed to the other two subgroups. Sharing principal Sean’s response, he stated:

Yes, I think so. (thinking) Yes. Internal candidates have a definite advantage. Because. Well, they have already been in the district. They know all the policies, procedures, programs, and personnel. Think about it. There is little to no training involved. And, they know the students, the parents. It would be such an easy transition.

The superintendent subgroup also shared the same sentiment. When posed with the same question, Bill added to the above opinion by including the support of the school community. Bill asserted:

Yes, a major advantage is that you should have a good idea whether the position is worth applying for. The advantage is two-fold. Yes, this feels right. I seem to have the entire community backing me on this venture. And, no this does not feel right, the stars are not aligned and I’m getting negative vibes. In which case, I would just go through the process as an exercise for the experience of getting better with the interview process.

A thought-provoking outlook was made by superintendent Toby. The same question was posed to Toby, and his response included a standpoint that there is a specific advantage when it comes to elementary principals over secondary principals and being selected for superintendent roles. He reverted to previous experiences when he shared:

Internal applicants have a background and a history that can either help or hurt them as they try to move up into this position. I think it is harder for secondary administrators than elementary administrators from within because they have had the harder discipline decisions that may be considered negative and on the opposite side. Outside applicants that do have secondary experience would have a harder time coming into a new district and might not even make the second interview.

Limiting the Pool of Qualified Applicants

The notion of school districts having an adequate pool of qualified applicants for superintendency has been on the radar for years. The findings of this study confirm that having a notable pool of superintendent applicants is still a concern, and implementing a GYO hiring approach may be a contributing factor to the limitations of qualified applicants. The researcher posed this question to the principals *‘What do you perceive might be the contributing factors of a limited pool of qualified applicants as they relate to GYO programs?’*

Sean responded:

I think GYO is more of a buddy-buddy type of approach. I have seen it too many times, more and more often. It's all about who you know . . . having friends in high places. You know, fishing buddies and all. If you know the right people, have the right connections, then you have a 99% chance of getting the job . . . qualifications or not. And, that's a shame.

Sean additionally shared his viewpoint on the disadvantages of GYO approaches, as he stated, "Disadvantages? Well, it's a huge disadvantage for the qualified 'outsider' who hasn't lived in this town all his life." The same question was posed to Liz. Her response also included previous experiences. She responded:

Is it just assumed that an internal applicant has the job? Or does the internal applicant have to interview alongside the external applicants? In the past, I have seen where the people in the district appear to get 'promoted.' There is always the question in everyone's mind, 'Was this person the best-qualified . . . or was it because they were friends with the central office people?'

The experiences have had an impact on the principals as they reflected and internalized the previous occurrences to find meaning. An important notion Liz voiced was that, "We need the best leaders for our district, even if it is applicants from other cities. We should be doing what's best for our district, staff, and students."

There were also concerns expressed by superintendents about the GYO hiring process having a limiting effect on qualified applicants. Toby conveyed concerns regarding a district's lack of growth and being closed-minded. The superintendent stated:

Opportunities for new ideas are sometimes missed because outside applicants bring ideas from other districts from different regions of the state, and a small-town culture like 'this is the way we do it here' can take over and stifle a district from growth.

It is evident through Toby's interpretation that the GYO hiring process can have an adverse impact on growing a district in a positive direction with regard to innovation. Additionally, Mike described that the GYO process can be portrayed as a 'lazy' approach to hiring.

Gender-Bias Impact

Another impressionable theme was that of the *gender-bias impact* on the applicant pool. It appears that the principals have more experience with gender stratification with regard to superintendent hiring in rural districts. Participants were asked, *'What practices have you observed with GYO programs as they relate to identifying quality characteristics of candidates?'* Sean responded:

You know, it kinda seems like most districts look to hire a male superintendent. I mean, who has not had some sort of experience with this? I have seen this happen too many times to count. You would like to think when a district looks to hire someone, even if it is internally, they should look to hire the best. More often than not, it's all about the 'good ol' boy' system. Honestly, it's an insult to the profession.

Liz also had similar contributions towards this question. While Liz stated she is not a product of a GYO formal program, she has seen colleagues go through these leadership hiring approaches. She added:

Everyone knew there was going to be an opening. We all, we were all assistant principals in the district at the time and were excited and thinking this was our shot at moving up.

There was a bit of competition between everyone who was interested in that position, but it was a healthy-type of competition. It soon became real clear who the frontrunner was. He was clearly friends with the superintendent. We all knew it. The superintendent would call him on his cell phone! The superintendent never called the other two of us on our cell phones. If he ever had a question for us, he would call our office extension. That's when things changed and friendships ended. Long story, so I will give you the short version. I'm sure you can guess who ended up with the principal position. Yep. (sigh) Yeah, it's all about who you know. Of course, it was explained to the rest of us that he, "his friend," was the 'better qualified' candidate. We all wondered if it was a coincidence that the other two applicants, myself and my colleague, were both female and if that had any bearing on the decision.

One additional observation made by superintendent Bill in response to the same question, he also based his response on previous experiences. Unlike Liz who spoke of her experiences regarding an administrative opening within her district, Bill described the differences in skills and characteristics in men and women and how that impacts employment at the superintendent level. He stated:

School board members are looking to hire someone who has experience, and hopefully expertise, at all levels. And let's face it, are they going to find the perfect person who knows everything in all facets of the position? Probably not. So, they are going to look for someone who is strong in school finance and has the ability to relate to their teachers and community. Please don't take this wrong, but typically men are stronger in the areas of finance and building and maintenance. And women, they are stronger with building relationships. So, when you put yourself in the school board's position . . . well, who would you hire?

When implementing leadership approaches such as a GYO approach in an organization, the impacts can be undesirable and have adverse ripple effects on the organization's personnel. Utilizing a GYO approach to fill leadership position vacancies within rural school districts is no exception. This study's findings have indicated that implementing a GYO approach in a rural school district leads to *limiting the pool of qualified applicants* as well as having a *gender-bias impact on applicants*. Moreover, the unwillingness of five (5) rural superintendents (including 3 male and 2 female) and seven (7) (including 6 male and 1 female) rural school board presidents choosing to decline to participate in the study within a 150-mile radius within South Texas, is indicative of cultural practices that appear exclusionary.

DISCUSSION

According to the participant data in this study, implementing a GYO approach in rural school districts may have a negative impact relative to securing a pool of qualified applicants for the superintendent role. Moreover, participant perceptions reveal that an adverse consequence in the use of the GYO hiring process results in a gender-bias effect for the applicant pool. These undesirable outcomes will be explored in relation to the existing literature on GYO programs and approaches.

Additionally, the research conducted by Steed et al. (2004) was confirmed by this study, in that the GYO process is subjective in nature. The participants stated the GYO process was a "buddy-buddy type of approach", it is easy to "settle for the internal applicant", and the GYO hiring process "can include premature hiring of individuals" before they are fully qualified. The

findings bring to light the question of whether the ‘subjective employment is of best-fit’ (Palmer et al., 2016). Another correlation between literature and the findings of this study was that there are times when an internal candidate is primed by a member of the interview committee (Buckman et al., 2018). This was the case with Liz when her principal offered her an internal position for assistant principal without going through the interview process. This also resonates with the findings by Bengtson et al. (2013) when the researchers report that vacancies are anticipated ahead of time, and therefore administrators make plans ahead of time to fill the opening.

On the other hand, several of the participants stated that the GYO process helps to facilitate growing the local professional talent (Hammer et al., 2005). The majority of the participants acknowledged internal applicants have the advantage of knowing the district’s procedures, policies, and culture. Joe stated that his district implements the GYO process and believes it contributes to “encouraging our educators to continue their education and career goals.” He added that the implementation contributes two-fold as it shows: “one, we have a strong team of educators with potential, and two, our administrative team does well with mentoring new upcoming administrators.”

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have direct implications for the educational workplace. As this research revealed, a district which implements a GYO hiring process can experience negative outcomes, such as having a limited pool of highly-qualified applicant pool as well as leaving the impression on other applicants that there is a gender-bias to the identified approach. There were, however, also identified implications which illustrate there are educators who support the GYO process and are in favor of looking for internal applicants to fill leadership vacancies. Districts which choose to implement a GYO approach to filling leadership vacancies, such as the superintendent role, can also be at an advantage when hiring internal candidates. Therefore, it remains a debate whether the GYO approach has more advantages or more disadvantages to the workplace, as well as the candidates.

The predominant population of students in this region is Hispanic, with a high percentage of low-socioeconomic students served. Student achievement levels in South Texas are subpar per Texas Performance Assessment Results (TAPR) provided annually by the Texas Education Agency. As rural school districts in the region continue these exclusionary hiring practices, not finding the most highly qualified candidate and limiting applicant pools through their practices thus further compounds dismal student achievement and ultimately will impact the economy of Texas. Implications for inclusionary hiring practices are noted to ensure Texas has an educated populace as this minority/majority demographic shift occurs.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Rural communities represent a distinct segment of the educational community, and as such, their views of what constitutes values of knowledge and education can differ significantly from the established national norms and values. (Rey, 2014, p. 509)

A concern for the administrative world generally in education is the shortage of highly qualified applicants to fill vacancies. Normore (2004) recognized this phenomenon and credited that shortage at the time to the mass retirements of school administrators; however, the trend has

continued (Benigni et al., 2020). Initiatives such the GYO approach was explored in this study as one significant effort to address the shortage of highly qualified rural administrative candidates and school districts' leadership succession plans (Normore, 2004). Stakeholders from the rural districts who participated generally did not respect the GYO approach overall noting that while it did afford opportunities to “groom” future leaders, the process was piecemeal in these districts and even the two sitting superintendents who were GYO candidates, were cautious about the approach citing concern for selection of the best candidate for the position. The current research on school districts implementing the practice of hiring internal candidates to fill leadership vacancies in rural districts has been limited (Davis & Bowers, 2018; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). This study in its final form anticipates making a significant contribution to lending insight into yet another “wicked problem” (Corbett & Tinkham, 2014) impacting rural schools.

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