

LEADERSHIP COACHING: BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF URBAN PRINCIPALS IN UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This investigation assesses the effects of leadership coaching on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of urban public school administrators in P-12 underperforming schools. The study specifically examines leadership, management, and student achievement growth during the time of coaching. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, three domains were assessed: (a) urban principals' perceptions about changes in their leadership behaviors, (b) student achievement growth on standardized tests during the time of coaching, and (c) participants' and coaches' perceptions of their experience in the program from interviews and coaches' logs. Results demonstrate significantly increased principal capacity in nine leadership responsibilities and positive student achievement gains after coaching the principals. This information will assist professional developers, university professors, and school personnel as they structure and implement programs to support urban school administrators.

Keywords: Leadership Coaching, Principals, Student Achievement, Urban

School principals directly impact school climate, teachers' classroom practices and attitudes, organization of curriculum and instruction, and, most importantly, student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Despite the connections found in the research among effective principals, successful schools, and student achievement, many principals find themselves beginning their careers at or being transferred to ineffective schools with limited knowledge of how to transform the school and little to no support from the district (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Houle, 2006; Mitgang, 2012; Weingartner, 2009). Today's leaders, particularly in urban schools, must be willing and equipped to address inequities in access to opportunities provided for students (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Leadership coaching is vital to the induction of early career principals, though there is relatively little in the literature about its effectiveness as measured by student achievement. An abundance of literature about mentoring programs for

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beginning principals can be found; however, there have been few empirical or evaluative studies about these programs. Furthermore, few if any studies have been conducted that seek to gain knowledge from leadership coaches who have worked with urban school administrators (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Hansford & Erich, 2005; Mitgang, 2012).

This investigation assessed the effects of leadership coaching on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of urban public school administrators in P-12 schools designated by the California state as underperforming. The study specifically examined the leadership and management practices of school principals participating in a coaching program and the subsequent extent of student achievement growth at their schools. The following research questions guided the investigators as they analyzed the nature and extent of change in urban school principals who participated in a county office of education-sponsored program focusing on coaching leaders to promote student success.

Research Questions:

- What managerial and leadership challenges do urban principals identify, and are they addressed by coaches?
- How effective is coaching for urban principals as measured by perceived changes in nine of 21 responsibilities of school leaders specific to the principal (Marzano et al., 2005)?
- Does student academic achievement measured by standardized test scores increase, and to what extent, when principals are being coached? Does the increase persist the year after coaching?

Conceptual Framework

It is vitally important to provide access to high quality schooling for every child. However, a recent Civil Rights Data Collection report released by the US Department of Education (2011) indicates that “far too many students are still not getting access to the kinds of classes, resources, and opportunities they need to be successful” (para. 3). In many cases, urban students face this type of *under-education* in greater proportion (US Department of Education, 2011). Training school leaders to connect all students to high quality schooling that addresses their individual needs is one promising solution (Delpit, 2006; Larson & Barton, 2013). Elements of the most successful training programs include an analysis of the educator’s core values—and a highly selective screening process, specific and direct teaching about how to engage and nurture community involvement, and research-based guidance on improving instruction, especially in mathematics and reading/language arts (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mitgang, 2012; Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008).

The Role of an Urban Principal

Principals in urban schools, particularly those labeled as low performing,

confront numerous challenges as they struggle to improve student achievement. These leaders often face public scrutiny due to state and federal legislation identifying their schools as failing (Houle, 2006). Leading a school in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has resulted in increased accountability measured in ways some deem biased or limited (Christensen, 2012; Contreras, 2005; Hilliard, 2012; McNeil, 2000; Miner, 2012; Neill, 2003, 2012; Williams & Miner, 2012). Additionally, ongoing challenges for these schools and principals include inadequate funding, balancing school management with instructional leadership, new curriculum standards, and possible termination if their schools do not show immediate results (Mitgang, 2012). These conditions have created increased job stress for many urban principals, resulting in a shortage of talented educators to lead urban schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Challenging working conditions have made the principalship less appealing as a career option for many educators. This phenomenon occurs even more often in urban districts with low performing schools (Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003; Weingartner, 2009; Winter & Morgenthal, 2002). Darling-Hammond (2010) and Mitgang (2012) report that principal turnover has reached crisis proportions. The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) claims that the average tenure of a California principal is three years. This is often due to lack of success on the job, largely determined by the more narrow measures imposed by NCLB. ACSA also predicts a turnover of nearly 40% of the state's principals in the next few years (Adler & Bossi, 2008). Given this reality, districts must retain current leaders and make the job more attractive to potential candidates (Larson & Barton, 2013; Novak, Reilly, & Williams, 2010).

Leadership Coaching Fundamentals

One means of retaining school principals is through leadership coaching. Leadership coaching, though a relatively new aspect of educational administration, provides the support principals need and a structure for contextualized job training. Leadership coaches experienced in educational administration can give their coachees, such as early career principals, a direct connection to practical knowledge (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2006). Further, the job-embedded nature of the coach-principal relationship offers practical and timely opportunities for relevant learning (Fullan, 2008; Novak et al., 2010; Smith, 2007; Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003).

An effective leadership coach-principal relationship is intentionally structured. Principals are paired with a coach from outside of their district whose leadership style and experience complement their own and who is deemed successful and respected. Then, the coach establishes a relationship of trust and support with the principal, while providing opportunities for purposeful reflection and interaction where the boundaries for the time investment have been clearly established (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). Coaches work most efficiently when they have empathy and foresight about the challenges to and goals for student achievement faced by early career principals (Conyers, 2004; Rich & Jackson, 2005; Weingartner, 2009).

Principal's Role in Student Achievement

The quality of the principal's work is second only to the quality of teachers when determining factors that influence school improvement, particularly in high-poverty schools. Recent reports have suggested that principals account for 25% of the school-level impact on student achievement (Kearney, 2011; Woodard, 2013). As a coach and principal work together, they build a principal's self-efficacy and consequently their ability to improve student achievement (Kearney, 2010).

Principals who work with a coach learn how to navigate the challenges of the job while reflecting about their ability to improve student achievement (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010). ACSA is a pioneer in training leadership coaches to work with school administrators and in studying the effectiveness of the leadership coaching process. The organization set out to determine if principals who participated in their two-year coaching program led schools whose test scores increased during the years they were coached and whether or not the student achievement continued to increase the year after the coaching. Student achievement was measured by changes in the school's Academic Performance Index (API). API is a measurement in California based on a formula using student academic achievement on state-mandated standardized tests. While questions about the legitimacy and validity of high-stakes standardized tests as an authentic measurement of student achievement remain, such instruments represent one of the most common assessment tools used in the evaluation of school quality at this time (Christensen, 2012; Contreras, 2005; Hilliard, 2012; McNeil, 2000; Miner, 2012; Neill, 2003, 2012; Williams & Miner, 2012).

Given the limitations and bias inherent in standardized testing and API tabulation, the ACSA study's findings showed 40 of the 50 participants in the two-year coaching program were at schools with positive API growth from the first year through the second year of coaching. One cohort achieved an average 20.6 points, and the other cohort attained a 22-point growth in API scores during the two years of coaching. API scores from one of the two cohorts of principals were reported and analyzed for report for their first year the first year after participating principals received coaching. Twenty-two of these 25 principals led schools where scores increased with an average growth of 12.36 API points (Adler & Bossi, 2008). The ACSA program is the same coaching model used by the participants in this study.

Method and Data Sources

Participants

Participants included a purposeful sampling of principals and coaches from two large, urban districts who had participated in the county office of education coaching program. All 22 principals from these districts and their eight

coaches who participated in the coaching program one to two years during 2005-2010 were contacted by telephone and/or email by the county office and this research team and invited to participate in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary with informed consent obtained from all participants. Participants' data were coded to ensure confidentiality throughout the investigation. Five of the six principals in District A, thirteen of sixteen principals in District B, and all eight coaches elected to participate in the interviews; ten principals completed surveys; and ten coach logs (documenting all coaching sessions for each principal) were randomly selected for review.

The principal participants all worked at elementary, middle, or high school Program Improvement Schools (based on NCLB Annual Yearly Progress scores; see Table 1). Six (32%) of the principals self-identified as African American, three (16%) as Hispanic/Latino, and ten (52%) as White. One (12%) of the coaches self-identified as African American and seven (88%) as White. According to the coaching program administrators, all of the coaches had previously worked as administrators in the same level and county in which the coaches served as principals.

Table 1

Demographic Data for the Districts Where Participants Served as Principals

| | District A Grades P-8 | District B Grades P-12 |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Total Number of Students Enrolled | 22,561 | 27,453 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 87.54% | 75.5% |
| Caucasian | 5.53% | 5.4% |
| African American | 3.29% | 15.9% |
| Asian American | 2.08% | 1.0% |
| American Indian | .51% | .3% |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | 1.04% | 1.0% |
| Multiple Races or No Response | -- | .8 |
| English Learners | 52% | 32% |
| Students with Special Needs | 10% | 7.2% |
| Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Priced Meals | 85.3% | 80.2% |

All data retrieved from DataQuest (<http://www.cde.ca.gov>)

Quantitative Methods

Two quantitative measures were employed with the principal participants. First, an electronic questionnaire was used to determine the principals' attitudes toward the coaching received (Babbie, 1990). Principal participants were asked to complete an online self-administered questionnaire (Fink, 1995) based on the

Mid-Continent Research in Education Laboratory's (McRel) Balanced Leadership Framework that assesses 21 leadership responsibilities (Marzano et al., 2005). These authors grouped the 21 responsibilities into two sets, nine of which are the principal's specific responsibility to perform. The principal uses the nine responsibilities to equip the leadership team to carry out the other twelve responsibilities. For the purposes of this study, the nine responsibilities identified by McRel as critical for principals in building a *purposeful community* with a strong leadership team were analyzed (See Table 2). A school that is a *purposeful community* has collective efficacy (the sense that together members can all make a difference) and the ability to build and use assets to achieve shared goals. While the principal can use the nine responsibilities to enlist the leadership of others, it is the full leadership team that enacts all 21 responsibilities and brings about true school transformation.

The 276-item self-assessment tool measured perceived changes in the principals' leadership behaviors and the impact of the leadership coaching. Each set of items asked the participants to reflect on their ability to carry out the behavior before working with a coach, their ability to carry it out after working with a coach (both Likert scale items), and whether or not the coach had helped develop the leadership behavior described in the item (yes/no format). Items were grouped by leadership responsibility. The data were analyzed using paired tests to determine perceived growth in the nine principal leadership behaviors during the time of the coaching.

Table 2

The Nine Leadership Responsibilities a Principal Uses to Build a School Staff's Leadership Capacity and a Purposeful Community

| Leadership Responsibility | The Extent to Which the Principal... |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Input | Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies |
| Affirmation | Recognizes and celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges failures |
| Relationship | Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff |
| Visibility | Has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students |
| Situational Awareness | Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems |
| Communication | Establishes strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students |
| Optimizer | Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations |
| Ideals/Beliefs | Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling |

| | |
|---------|---|
| Culture | Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation |
|---------|---|

(Marzano et al., 2005)

The second quantitative measure utilized to determine changes in student achievement was the school's API. Student achievement was measured by changes in the school's API during the time the principal led the school and was coached and the year following coaching. A score of 800 out of a possible 1000 points is the target for all schools. Schools not attaining the state target are assigned a yearly growth target. The principals in this study were leading urban schools scoring well below the 800-point target.

Validity and reliability of the instrument

The Balanced Leadership Framework questionnaire was modified for the purpose of this study, with permission of the publisher. The McRel questionnaire had a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .92 (Marzano et al., 2005). For this study, the coefficient alpha range of the nine scales was from .48 to .88 on the pre-survey and from .72 to .93 on the post-survey.

Qualitative Methods

The three qualitative measures in the study included principal interviews, leadership coach interviews, and detailed log entries by coaches for each visit. Interviews of 45-60 minutes were conducted at a predetermined time and location selected by the participant. There were two sets of interview questions: one for principals (19 items) and one for leadership coaches (18 items). The items addressed the managerial and leadership aspects of then confirmed, named, and grouped the principal's work, the coach's role, the relationship between the principal and coach, and how these impacted student achievement. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis of content. Two years of coaches' session logs were analyzed.

Triangulation was accomplished by a team of five researchers through analysis of the coaches' logs and both types of interviews using a constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Coded categories were determined and to determine the effectiveness of the coaching program. They focused on (a) the nature of the change, (b) factors influencing the change, and (c) the depth of change.

Results

Quantitative

Globally, all nine areas of leadership responsibilities as seen in Table 3 showed significant growth. The principal participants strongly acknowledged the contributions of their coaches to growth in these areas. Furthermore, analysis of student achievement based on state API scores at the participants' schools indicates positive gains (Table 4). The average targeted growth for the county was six points. Most of these participants far exceeded their targets during coaching and maintained it the year following. These student achievement gains are also greater than those reported in the ACSA study (Adler & Bossi, 2008) for participants who were in a similar program for two years.

Table 3
Pre and Post Mean Differences from Survey on Impact of Coaching on Nine Leadership Responsibilities

| | <u>Before Coaching</u> | | <u>After Coaching</u> | | <u>df</u> |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | <u>M</u> | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u> | <u>SD</u> | |
| Input | 3.3 | 0.66 | 3.83 | 0.67 | 30 |
| 4.05 *** | | | | | |
| Affirmation | 3.44 | 0.59 | 3.96 | 0.77 | 30 |
| 4.68*** | | | | | |
| Relationship | 3.53 | 0.74 | 3.87 | 0.74 | 30 |
| 3.59* | | | | | |
| Visibility | 3.87 | 0.62 | 4.2 | 0.72 | 30 |
| 2.68* | | | | | |
| Situational Awareness | 3.45 | 0.53 | 3.93 | 0.69 | 29 |
| 3.97*** | | | | | |
| Communication | 3.65 | 0.51 | 4.06 | 0.72 | 30 |
| 3.46* | | | | | |
| Optimizer | 3.9 | 0.59 | 4.24 | 0.71 | 30 |
| 2.6* | | | | | |
| Ideals/Beliefs | 3.75 | 0.56 | 4.2 | 0.57 | 29 |
| 4.38*** | | | | | |
| Culture | 3.12 | 0.61 | 4.95 | 0.67 | 30 |
| 6.0*** | | | | | |

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4***Student Achievement Gains at Principals' Schools Measured by School Academic Performance Index (API) Yearly Increases during Years Coached and One Year after Coaching***

| | Number | Percentage | API Growth |
|--|--------|------------|------------|
| Principals Participating in First Year of Coaching | 24 | | |
| Principals with Positive API Growth During First Year of Coaching | 16 | 73 | |
| Average API Growth During First Year of Coaching | | | 8.27 |
| Principals Participating in Second Year of Coaching | 7 | | |
| Principals with Positive API Growth During Second Year of Coaching | 7 | 100 | |
| Average API Growth During Second Year of Coaching | | | 20.29 |
| Principals at Same School One Year After Coaching (Data only available for District B) | 15 | | |
| Principals at Same School with Positive API Growth One Year After Coaching | 14 | 93 | |
| Average API Growth One Year After Coaching | | | 21.8 |

Note: Student achievement was measured by changes in the school's API during the time the principal led the school and was coached and the year following coaching. All data retrieved from DataQuest (<http://www.cde.ca.gov>)

Qualitative

Analysis of the three qualitative data sources in Table 5 reveals several

patterns to support themes related to the leadership capacities principals gained through the coaching experience.

Principals and coaches noted high levels of change in knowledge, skills, and dispositions as a result of the coaching experience. Both sets of respondents identified the importance of context-specific instruction, modeling, and reflection inherent in the *blended coaching model* (New Teacher Center, 2009). The blended coaching model includes two aspects: instructional coaching and facilitative coaching.

Table 5

Leadership Capacities Principals Gained Through the Coaching Experience as Reported by Principals and Coaches in Interviews and Logs, and Corresponding Nine Leadership Responsibilities

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | The principals and their coaches acknowledged through interviews and logs that the coaching experience provided support through: | Corresponding Nine Leadership Responsibilities from McRel's Balanced Leadership Framework (Marzano et al., 2005) |
| Trusting Relationships | A trusting relationship with an outside, experienced expert | |
| Feedback | Feedback that was constructive, corrective, goal-oriented, and non-evaluative | |
| Resources | Resources in the form of readings, site visits, and referrals to outside experts | |
| Relationship Building | Relationship building ideas on how to work with, support, and communicate with teachers, students, staff, parents, and the district office | Communication, Relationship, Affirmation, Visibility |
| Changing School Cultures, Team Building, Political Savvy | Ideas for changing school cultures, team building, and becoming more politically savvy | Culture, Input, Situational Awareness |
| School Management | School management help with site specific examples | Situational Awareness |
| Reflection and Accountability | encouragement to become more reflective and accountable | Optimizer |
| Instructional Leadership | A focus on instructional leadership toward student achievement, always guided by | Ideals/Beliefs |

| a vision and beliefs, including |
| use of data to guide decisions |

Participants revealed they were guided to understand the difference between *equal* and *equitable*, use disaggregated data to drive all decisions, and provide high-quality staff development—practices proven to provide access for marginalized students from underrepresented groups and improve school culture (Larson & Barton, 2013). Illustrated by the comment of one principal below, many of the participants shared that their coach guided them in transforming the school and increasing student success:

My coach helped me navigate through tougher personalities, union issues, and he really emphasized the importance of relationships. I absolutely attribute our student success to the change in culture he helped me achieve. We've gone up 160 API points in three years. Our morale is up, our discipline is wonderful on campus.

Participants acknowledged that the focus on *instructional coaching* with more didactic teaching strategies, including showing and telling, was beneficial, particularly as they learned specific strategies that focused on raising student achievement. One principal, when attributing growth in her capacity to be an instructional leader to her coach, shared:

My coach had a wealth of experience and she was able to share a variety of different strategies that she had used over the years with her own experiences...We would sit down and talk about what we were going to do and we would walk through classrooms and then discuss my next steps in helping the school to improve student achievement. She even gave me timelines.

The participants also recognized their own professional growth and self-actualized reflective practice gained through *facilitative coaching*. Highlighted by one principal's response below, they realized the importance of collaborating as they included others in the school community for transformation:

My coach had a huge positive impact on me. He taught me how to win teachers over. We role-played situations with me acting as the principal and him acting as the teacher to figure out what the focus plan might look like. He'd ask, "How did that play out?" He was good at giving practice and getting me to reflect right on the spot" (Principal).

These qualitative themes support the nine leadership responsibilities found in the survey results to have significant growth due to coaching (Table 5).

Discussion and Implications

Urban principals at underperforming schools hold a vitally important role, particularly in regard to student achievement. To effectively carry out this role, principals need job-embedded training. Leadership coaching by an experienced former school administrator may provide such training, easing the transition and equipping them with tools to enhance student learning. The coaching becomes even more powerful when the coach brings an understanding of the context of the coachee's school. It is highly desirable that the coach have experience at the school level and in working with the demographics of the coachee's school.

This investigation revealed areas in which leadership coaching positively impacted the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of P-12 public school administrators in two large, urban school districts and documented growth in student achievement at their schools during the time the principals were coached. The researchers, however, acknowledge two areas as possible limitations to the findings of the study: (a) the complicated nature of suggesting causality between student test scores and a school principal's job performance, and (b) the length of time that passed between the leadership coaching sessions and reports by both groups about their experiences.

Inasmuch as school improvement can be measured by the Academic Performance Index, the schools led by principals and coaches participating in this study showed growth in student learning. As new, less biased means of measuring individual student learning become more widely available, it is likely that leadership coaching of principals will become even more structured and direct. Principals will need more opportunities to learn about the context-specific needs of students attending their schools. Ultimately, this study set out to discover how one county office's leadership coaching program has effectively brought about improvements in student learning and more educational opportunities. This is the highest calling of today's educational leader. This information will inform professional developers, university professors, and school personnel as they structure and implement programs to support urban P-12 school administrators.

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