

Suburban District Leadership Does Matter

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Introduction

The increased demand for educational reform and accountability has resulted in a renewed focus on the relationship between building leaders and district leaders, particularly on how district leaders can support principals to ensure the academic success of students. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RtT) legislations hold both schools and districts accountable for setting high standards and establishing measurable goals that will improve school achievement. However NCLB, as noted by Marsh & Robin (2006), failed to outline the strategies for building and district level leaders, "instead leaving to the discretion of the school and district administrators the responsibility for identifying strategies that best fit their particular local context and address their specific needs" (p.2). Therefore an essential role of district leaders is to make educational reform a reality by translating policies into improved school practices that enhance the leadership of principals (Bottoms & Fry, 2009).

Problem, Significance, and Purpose

A majority of recent district leadership studies focus exclusively on the context and conditions existing in large urban districts in need of reform (Bottoms & Fry, 2009, Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig et al, 2010, Plecki, M.L., Knapp, M.S., Castaneda, T, Haverson, T., LaSota, R., Lochmiller, C., 2009; Waters & Marazano, 2006). Collectively, these studies offer insight into district leadership practices that have worked within urban school districts toward meeting educational reform and accountability expectations. However, there is limited research focused on district leadership in suburban districts. The question is whether these urban district leadership practices WILL WORK in suburban school districts.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether successful urban research-based district leadership practices have applicability to suburban district leaders.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent do suburban district leaders perceive research-based district leadership practices as important in strengthening principals' instructional practices in order to improve teaching and learning in schools?

2. To what extent do suburban district leaders implement perceived district leadership practices, when controlling for district size, student demographics, and financial resources?
3. Do district conditions of district size, student demographics, and financial resources affect the reported use of suburban district leaders' use of effective research-based practices?

Methods

Participants

The subjects were district leaders from 127 suburban school districts in Long Island, New York. Among the 127 local school districts, 57 of them were located in Nassau County, and 70 of them situated in Suffolk County. District leaders have responsibility for developing and implementing goals for student learning and achievement, as well as building supportive and nurturing relationships with school building leaders, school district business leaders, and key stakeholders (NYSTCE, 2008). An online survey was sent to all district leaders in the identified school districts. A total of 145 participants including superintendents, deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, K-12 directors, and chairpersons completed the online survey questionnaire.

Instrument

The online survey questionnaire used in this study was designed by the researchers based on the framework of Honig et al.'s (2010) five dimensions of district leadership: Learning-Focused Partnership, Assistance to the Partnership, Refocused Organizational Culture, Stewardship of District Leadership, and Use of Evidence, as well as various empirical studies that examined leadership practices (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Bottom & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Forner et al., 2012; Plecki et al., 2009; and Waters & Marazano, 2006). The survey was comprised of three sections with forty-one questions. Each question item was answered on a four-point Likert scale, with "1= very often; 2= often; 3= sometimes; and 4= never." The researchers examined the face validity of the online survey using an expert panel group, who took the survey prior to the administration of the actual survey under a similar context.

Dependent Variables

There were five dependent variables in this study: 1) Learning-focused Partnerships; 2) Assistance to the Partnerships; 3) Refocused Organizational Culture; 4) Stewardship of District Leadership; and 5) Use of Evidence. These five variables were derived from the framework of district leadership dimensions developed by Honig et al. (2010). Learning-focused partnerships refers to the quality of the personal relationships established between central office and school leaders. Elements of this one-on-one relationship include mentoring and monitoring. Assistance to the partnership between central office and school based leaders includes providing professional development and organizing principals' schedules to enable them to focus on instruction. Refocusing organizational culture refers to the extent to which both central office and building leaders accept responsibility for teaching and learning outcomes. Stewardship of district leadership refers to the strategies central office leaders use to insulate external forces from negatively impacting the work of principals. Finally, use of evidence refers to the focus of central office leaders on student performance data and the effect of these data on their decision making. This study examined each variable at two levels: 1) the district leader's perceptions of his/her district's leadership orientation; and 2) his/her own perceptions of actual implementation of research-based leadership practices.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in this study were 1) district size; 2) student demographics; and 3) financial resources, identified to explore whether or not they influenced district leaders' reported use of research-based district leadership practices.

District size. The district size was defined by the number of schools (elementary, middle and high schools) within the district's geographic school zone, as well as the number of students enrolled from kindergarten to grade 12 as reported in the 2012-2013 Basic Educational Data System (BEDS) within the New York State Department of Education.

Student demographics. The student demographics examined in the study were district's percentage of students identified with a disability, limited English proficiency, and academic performance (3rd-8th Math and ELA Assessments).

Financial resources. The study identified districts' financial resources based on the percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced lunch and the annual school budget.

Data Analyses

The researchers used Cronbach's alpha analysis to determine the internal consistency or reliability of the survey's test items for section two and three of the online survey. The Cronbach's alpha analysis for both sections resulted in an

alpha coefficient of .920, suggesting that the items had a relatively high internal consistency.

Based upon the relatively high internal consistency found in section two and three test items, the researchers conducted factor analysis to determine if underlying unobservable variables (latent) were present in the observed variables (manifest). Factor analysis resulted in the following new constructs: Principal Partnership (.920), District Stewardship (.729), and District Partnership (.719). Participants' perceptions of their use of effective district leadership practices checked for survey items that conceptually aligned to section two of the survey obtained a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .865 and the Bartlett test of Sphericity yielded a significance value of .000.

The researchers used these new dimensions to answer the research questions when conducting descriptive and statistical analysis. Descriptive analysis determined district leaders' perceptions of their districts' leadership orientation, the extent to which they reported using leadership practices, as well as their perceptions of the importance of these practices in strengthening principals' instructional leadership. To determine if there were significant differences in the means, the researchers conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) between the three district leadership dimensions and district conditions (i.e., district size, student demographics, and financial resources). To answer research question #3, the study conducted a correlation analysis to determine if district conditions (i.e., district size, student demographics, and financial resources) affected suburban district leaders' reported use of the newly constructed research-based leadership dimensions-Principal Partnership, District Stewardship, and District Partnership and their aligned district leadership practices. Lastly, the researchers conducted multiple linear regression analysis to determine the relationship between district conditions (i.e., district size, student demographics, and financial resources) and district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices by fitting a linear equation to the data.

Findings

The initial framework of Honig et al.'s (2010) five dimensions of leadership orientation was examined; however, only three dimensions emerged in this study: 1) Principal Partnership, 2) District Stewardship, and 3) District Partnership. The Principal Partnership dimension involves district leaders providing principals with differentiated assistance that involves modeling instructional leadership, developing tools, brokering external resources, and allowing principals to serve as resources to one another. The District Stewardship dimension involves district leaders communicating a theory of action, brokering resources to assist district leaders in supporting theories of actions, and developing and using accountability measures to evaluate theories of actions that allow them to inform practice and decisions. The District Partnership dimension involves district leaders building their leadership capacity, teaming with other district leaders, and developing theories of action collaboratively.

Descriptive and statistical analysis revealed that suburban district leaders perceived Principal Partnership as "very important" in strengthening principals' instructional leadership practices, and they reported that their districts largely engaged in leadership practices aligned to Principal Partnership. However, district leaders reported "often," as opposed to "very often," implementing these practices. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the responses of Superintendents were significantly different from the responses of the Assistant Superintendents for Business. Specifically, Superintendents reported "often" engaging in district leadership practices that were aligned to the Principal Partnership, whereas Assistant Superintendents for Business reported that they "sometimes" engaged in these practices.

District leaders perceived District Stewardship as "very important" in strengthening principals' leadership practices that improve teaching and learning in schools. They also perceived their district to "a great extent" engaged in District Stewardship. However, district leaders across all positions reported "often," rather than "very often," implementing practices in the District Stewardship dimension. No statistically significant mean differences were found in district leaders' reported use of District Partnership dimension by position, schools, student enrollment, students with disabilities and/or limited English proficiency, academic performance.

District leaders perceived District Partnership to be "important" in strengthening principals' instructional practices that improve teaching and learning in schools. They perceived their district "somewhat" engaged in District Partnership, and reported "often" using the District Partnership dimension in actual leadership practices. A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis examined the relationship between district leaders' reported use of District Partnership, and district conditions. The results indicated that there was a small and positive significant relationship between the District Partnership dimension and students with free and/or reduced lunch status. In other words, in districts with higher percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced lunch, district leaders reported using more district leadership practices that aligned with the District Partnership dimension. Furthermore, a statistically significant positive relationship was also found between the District Partnership dimension and geographic location.

The researchers further conducted multiple linear regression analysis to explore the relationship between district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices aligned with the District Partnership dimension and the two identified statistically significant variables: 1) free and/or reduced lunch status, and 2) county. Regression model fit revealed that free and/or reduced lunch status significantly predicted district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices aligned with District Partnership. Similarly, district geographic locations also significantly predicted district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices aligned with the District Partnership dimension.

Discussion and Implications

Suburban and Urban Leadership Dimensions

This study challenged the conceptual framework found in the research literature relative to the dimensions of district leadership. The researchers found that suburban leaders' practices aligned with three rather than five of the urban leadership dimensions. This indicates that urban leadership research conceptual frames do not align neatly in the suburban contexts. This has significant implications for researchers investigating the relationship between suburban central office and school building leaders. In addition, the significant findings related the district size and poverty level of students to suggest that suburban district leaders' practices are sensitive to local contexts.

This study specifically indicates that the urban reinforcement of organization culture and the use of evidence dimensions are not of utility for suburban district leaders. The failure of these dimensions to load on our factor analysis suggests that in suburban districts both district leaders and principals are immersed in the same culture encompassed by typically uniform neighborhoods. Thereby, the dimension of reinforcement of organizational culture is not relevant as a distinct dimension as it would be in an urban district. In urban districts the school structures and the district office structures are quite distinct and physically separated encouraging the development of different cultures. With regard to the use of evidence urban and suburban districts differ in relationship to the layers of bureaucratic structures. Suburban tables of organization are relatively flat compared to complex urban systems. The suburban district leaders are so intimately involved in the supervisory and evaluative processes of principals that the development and use of evidential structures such as student performance scores has less relevance because data interpretation is typically collaborative.

Suburban district leaders reported using leadership practices aligned with the three leadership practices dimensions: 1) Principal Partnership, 2) District Stewardship, and 3) District Partnership. Overall, district leaders perceived their districts largely engaged in all three dimensions. They believed that all these dimensions were "very important" in strengthening principals' instructional leadership. However, they reported only "often" using these leadership practices on a daily basis. In an era of increased pressure on principals' accountability from the government and general public alike, district leaders need to increase their actual use of leadership practices in order to maximize the effectiveness of principals. Specifically, Assistant Superintendents for Business, who reported that they "sometimes" engaged in Principal Partnership, are significantly in need of increasing the aligned practices being that school boards are considering them as viable candidates for the superintendency due to the current economic downturn (Association of School Business Officials International, 2014). Although Assistant Superintendents for Business bring to the superintendency a strong

financial background they must also bring the ability to strengthening principals' instructional practices as a lever for improving teaching and learning in schools, if they do not want to debunk the perception of being a "bean counter."

Variations Among Suburban Districts Based on District Size and Poverty Level

The District Partnership dimension is closely aligned to Honig's Assistant to the Partnership dimension. This dimension at first appears somewhat displaced in a leadership construct between district leaders and principals. However, our correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis identified statistically significant relationships between District Partnership (i.e., collaborate with other district leaders, enhance district leaders' capacity, and develop theories of actions and practices) and district conditions (i.e., poverty and geographic location). The regression analysis revealed that as the poverty level (i.e., free and/or reduced lunch status) increased in the district, district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices aligned to this dimension increased. Similarly, as variances within geographic locations (i.e., Nassau and/or Suffolk County) increased, district leaders' reported use of district leadership practices aligned with the District Partnership dimension also increased.

When we look at the Long Island school districts' responses to the Common Core Standards and endorsement of the Opt-Out movement by school districts, the symbiotic relationship between district leaders and principals becomes clearer. In the political sphere, predominantly white middle class low needs districts joined forces and utilized leadership practices to bring principals into compliance. In poorer high needs districts, district leaders utilized practices to maintain high student attendance for testing and were generally silent on the opt-out issue. The take away is that district poverty and geographic location (some consider this a code phrase for race/ethnicity) will significantly mediate the use of leadership practices in suburban districts. Although statistics related to the percentages of students opting-out are not readily available for urban schools in New York State, the momentum for opt-out comes from the Long Island suburbs and not the urban districts.

Future researchers should continue design studies on the relationship of suburban central office leaders and school principals. In addition, they should seek more refined instrumentation for measuring the dimensions that impact that relationship. In addition, to further quantitative investigations, qualitative studies would help deepen our understanding of how suburban district leaders and principals perceive and understand their relationships.

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