

Still Waiting for “Superprincipal”: Examining U.S. Policymaker Expectations for School Principals, 2001-2011

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This study seeks to understand US policymaker expectations regarding principals during a decade of increased school accountability. We used historical methodology to map connections and locate themes among principal-centered reform documents and policies from the past ten years. We found that policymakers framed the principal as someone who: (1) serves as the focal point of school improvement initiatives, (2) delegates leadership to others, and (3) accepts ultimate individual responsibility for school results. We contend that, in the end, these three resonant policy themes from the decade intensified rather than softened the notion of school leader as superprincipal. The study concludes by considering implications.

INTRODUCTION

If America’s schools are going to deal affirmatively with the problems of candidate supply and attract strong, competent leaders into the ranks of school administration, we must deflate the pervasive myth of principal as everything to everyone.

Michael Copland (2001) “The Myth of the Superprincipal” (p. 532).

Our principals today, I think, are absolutely CEOs. They have to manage people. They have to be first and foremost instructional leaders. They have to manage multi-million dollar budgets. They have to manage facilities. They have to work with the community. The demands and the stresses on principals have never been greater...

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, quoted in The Wallace Foundation (2010) “Education Leadership: An Agenda for School Improvement” (p. 22).

This study is grounded in the notion that studying past educational policy debates, implementation approaches, and reform activities can help us understand the complexities of current change efforts in K-12 education, as well as the potential for future progress (Cuban, 2010; Hess, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Specifically, we sought to understand United States (US) policymaker expectations regarding principals over the past decade, as test-score-derived accountability became systemic and pervasive. Previous historical accounts have centered on

the principalship, including Kafka (2009), who provided a concise longitudinal overview that showcased the fact that principals played an important role in schools long before the decade of 2000-2010. Rousmaniere (2007) called on historians to produce more relevant studies of the position. Broad historical overviews such as Brown (2005) and Beck and Murphy (1993) provided insight into how public beliefs regarding the importance of school principals have remained constant even as role expectations have changed. In terms of the origin of the term “superprincipal,” early appearances in the late 1970’s (Schroeder, 1977; Weldy, 1979) preceded references in later decades. At times, authors invoked the term as a main article focus (e.g. Chamley, McFarlane, Young, & Caprio, 1992; Copland, 2001), while at other times authors referenced the concept within the context of a broader analysis of the principalship (e.g. Adams & Copland, 2007; Grubb & Flessa, 2006). Our study augments principal-centric historical scholarship as well as studies focused on the “superprincipal” by presenting how the last decade’s policy talk and action have manifested the idea that school leaders should (if not *must*) possess heroic qualities.

Our study also adds to existing research literature regarding the effects of accountability policy implementation on school leaders by detailing an emerged, accountability-infused policy context that has helped sustain the belief that only “superprincipals” need apply. Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, and Zoltners (2002), for instance, utilized a cognitive perspective to examine how administrators and teacher leaders in three Chicago schools made sense of, constructed, and mediated high-stakes district accountability policy implementation in their schools in accordance with their differing personal inclinations and institutional contexts. Another study found that school leaders adapted organizational routines in an attempt to couple a school’s instructional practices with government regulations in the form of academic performance standards (Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011). McGhee and Nelson (2005), meanwhile, described a climate of fear that school evaluation pressures induced among principals. In New York City, principals became more likely to respond to external accountabilities such as test scores rather than follow an internal, moral compass to guide their school leadership (Shipps & White, 2009) and many felt “beleaguered” rather than “empowered” (Shipps, 2012).

In this study, we asked: In what ways did major principal-focused reform efforts over the last ten years reflect changing policymaker expectations regarding the position? To address this question, we engaged as historians and examined principal-centered reform policy documents from the past decade. Specifically, we sought connections among K-12 educational leadership *policy talk*, such as foundation-sponsored studies, and *policy action*, such as federal legislation or changes in state school leadership standards (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). To highlight these connections, we employed a qualitative technique to create textual maps that describe how a trending reform idea gained greater visibility, as indicated by references to the trending reform idea in documents produced in the policy arena (Peck & Reitzug, 2012).

Based on our historical review of the decade’s policy talk and action, we found three resonant themes:

1. Principals are fundamentally important to school improvement;
2. Principals must distribute leadership and delegate duties; and
3. Principals must accept ultimate responsibility for school academic performance.

These challenging, interrelated, and occasionally, conflicting expectations describe an updated version of the mythical “superprincipal” who is “everything to everyone” (Copland, 2001, p.532)—only even more so. In addition to framing the NCLB superprincipal as the focal point of school improvement initiatives, the past decade’s policymakers positioned this heroic school leader as someone who would delegate leadership to others while accepting final individual responsibility for school results. By way of metaphor, while the superprincipal of the past leaped tall buildings in a single bound, the post-*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) superprincipal must compel an entire school community to leap that same tall building. Woe to her if she and her fellow leapers do not soar to sufficient heights, for there is a chunk of kryptonite (in the form of accountability consequences) waiting *for her* if *they* fail. In essence, the three resonant policy themes from the decade descended and interacted in ways that seemed to intensify rather than soften the notion of school leader as superprincipal.

Before examining our historical findings in greater detail, we first describe our methods and data sources.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Our study involved analysis of texts related to principal-focused reform that spanned 2001-2011. The collection of documents included scholarly literature, foundation-sponsored studies, policy documents, and popular press accounts. We retrieved the materials through Internet search engines like Google, academic data-bases such as *Lexis-Nexis Academic*, and library book collections. Using standard policy history methodology exemplified in works like Tyack and Cuban (1995) and Hess (2010), we examined the collected primary and secondary source documents to surface prevailing ideas and concepts. Similar to Beck and Murphy (1993), we aggregated results into definable thematic categories. Two of the three thematic categories used in this particular study are similar to those that surfaced in a previous study into the principal’s place in contemporary urban school politics (Peck & Mullen, 2010). From the results of this methodological process, we created a thematic history that emphasizes (or textually “maps” – see Peck and Reitzug [2012]) connections between what Tyack and Cuban (1995) described as “policy talk” (e.g., scholarly texts, foundation studies, and popular accounts) and “policy action” (e.g., changes in state standards, district policy, or federal legislation) (p. 40). Below, we share excerpts from our study’s thematic history and the resulting textual maps.

FINDINGS

Three major themes appeared in principal-focused reforms over the past decade.

Principals are fundamentally important to school improvement

The idea that principals play an important role in schools is well-established and long predates the decade of 2000-2010 (Kafka, 2009). A demonstrable change in policy makers’ and the public’s expectations of principals occurred, however, amidst the arrival of school accountability systems attendant to 2002’s federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Principals were now uniformly expected to *improve* student and school academic performance as measured by school report cards and other data-based metrics (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). Accordingly, policy talk in the form of scholarly works and foundation studies

showcased the positive effects principals could have toward making student and school numerical academic performance data increase. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), for instance, surveyed thirty years of research to provide quantitative documentation of how school leaders who exhibited certain leadership characteristics could dramatically boost student achievement. For the purposes of their study, they used “leader” and “principal” interchangeably, accentuating the idea that a sole individual could have a profound effect on school performance. In a subsequent publication, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) elaborated on what they had identified as the 21 “responsibilities” that characterized highly effective school leaders.

Of particular note in regard to policy talk, the Wallace Foundation began funding K-12 leadership studies and made the published results downloadable at no cost from their website. For instance, a freely-available Wallace Foundation-sponsored study (i.e., Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) provided a powerful key finding: “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). The authors explained that they defined leadership broadly in their study, and emphasized, “leadership is a highly complex concept” (p. 20). Nonetheless, they also noted that improving formal school leadership could make an outsized impact on academic performance.

Educational leadership, our review also makes clear, comes from many sources, not just the “usual suspects”—superintendents and principals. But the usual suspects are likely still the most influential. Efforts to improve their recruitment, training, evaluation and ongoing development should be considered highly cost-effective approaches to successful school improvement. (p. 70)

As the decade progressed, Leithwood and colleagues’ single finding regarding the importance of school leadership helped form a defining theme that principals mattered greatly for school improvement. Accordingly, this distilled kernel of policy talk drawn from the Leithwood and colleagues report informed policy action. For instance, an end note to the North Carolina State Board of Education (2006) “North Carolina Standards for School Executives [Principals]” stated, “The Wallace Foundation (2004) review of the research and literature on how leadership influences student learning found that leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning” (p. 11). The Leithwood and colleagues’ quote, “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” served as the opening, framing words in the “Standards for Educational Leadership in Rhode Island” (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2008), though the quote was attributed to The Wallace Foundation rather than Leithwood and his colleagues. Significantly, the ISSLC 2008 Educational Leadership Policy Standards, which influenced school leader standards in various states, explained, “research now shows that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that influence student outcomes, according to...research literature conducted in 2004 by Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom” (CCSSO, 2008).

Just as commonly, the statement was modified slightly and made without any attribution at all, as on this statement on the New York City Leadership Academy website:

“Research demonstrates that principals’ impact on student learning is second only to that of classroom teachers” (NYC Leadership Academy, n.d., p. 1). In another case from 2009, US Senator Al Franken (Democrat, Minnesota) sponsored proposed federal legislation called the *School Principal Recruitment and Training Act*. The text of the legislation submitted before Congress read in part, “Congress finds the following: (1) Research shows that school leadership quality is second only to teacher quality among school-related factors in its impact on student learning” (S. 2896--111th Congress, p. 2). Senator Franken repeated a similar claim in a blog post he made subsequent to the Bill’s submission, writing, “research shows that school leadership is second only to teacher quality in its impact on student learning” (Franken, 2010).

In essence, the idea that principals are fundamentally important to school improvement had taken firm hold in the policy arena in the decade of the 2000s.

Principals must distribute leadership and delegate duties

At the same time that principals were positioned as fundamentally important to school improvement, the notion that effective school administrators must share leadership throughout their buildings gained significant traction in policy talk. In educational leadership scholarship, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) helped define the concept of “distributed leadership.” In various works throughout the decade, Spillane refined the theory that principals who interacted effectively with teachers could create a shared, mutual perspective that resulted in a climate conducive to fostering school success (e.g. Spillane, 2005). Noting that the distributed leadership idea had existed in education for at least 70 years, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) emphasized, “Neither superintendents nor principals can carry out the leadership role by themselves. Highly successful leaders develop and count on leadership contributions from many others in their organizations” (p. 27). In their list of 21 “principal leadership responsibilities,” Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) emphasized collaboration when they described characteristics such as “culture – fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation” and “input – involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies” (p. 4). The Wallace Foundation-sponsored study, Portin, Schneider, DeArmand, and Gundlach (2003), reported shared leadership as a key tendency of the school principals they had studied, though the authors emphasized that contextual factors affected how much leadership and duties the principals were in fact willing to share with others. Popular principal preparation texts such as Robbins and Alvy (2009) emphasized the need for principals to involve teachers and staff in leadership activities and find ways to delegate duties.

The sustained emphasis on distributed leadership in policy talk significantly influenced policy action, as evident in new standards various states developed for school leaders during the decade. For example, “Iowa’s School Leadership Standards and Criteria” included statements such as, “In collaboration with others, [the school leader] uses appropriate data to establish rigorous, concrete goals in the context of student achievement and instructional programs” and “Promotes collaboration with all stakeholders” (School Administrators of Iowa, 2007, p.1). In its standards for school principals, Ohio included, “Standard #4: Collaboration - Principals establish and sustain collaborative learning and shared leadership to promote student learning and achievement of all students” (Ohio Educator Standards Board, 2007, p. 54).

Of particular note, the “North Carolina Standards for School Executives [Principals]” that was approved by the State Board of Education in 2006 emphasized the distributed nature of leadership through statements such as, “Leadership is not about doing everything oneself but it is always about creating processes and systems that will cause everything to happen” (NC Board of Education, 2006, p. 2). Adding emphasis to such points while also underscoring the broad sweep of the entire standards document, the text went on to note,

Taken as a whole these standards, practices and competencies are overwhelming. One might ask, “How can one person possess all of these?” The answer is they can not [sic]. It is, therefore, imperative that a school executive understands the importance of building an executive team that has complementary skills. (NC Board of Education, 2006, p. 2)

Showcasing policy talk’s influence on policy action, the North Carolina standards cited the Leithwood et al. (2004), Portin et al. (2003), and Waters et al. (2003) studies as influential in its development, though in each case authorship was attributed to the sponsoring organization (McRel and Wallace Foundation) rather than the individuals who actually executed the studies.

In sum, connections among school-leader-focused policy talk and action during the decade helped ensure that the theme “principals must distribute leadership and delegate duties” resonated.

Principals must accept ultimate responsibility for school academic performance

Signed into law in 2002, NCLB ushered in an era of unprecedented accountability for school performance (Vinovskis, 2009). Correspondingly, principals were positioned as ultimately responsible for student outcomes. Early in the decade, policy-related works such as Tucker and Coddling (2002) suggested looking to the business and military sectors for insight into how to better prepare principals to lead in an environment of heightened accountability. Some theorists eventually sought to “empower” principals by devolving increasing authority to school leaders in return for making them more responsible for school performance (Ouchi, 2009; Shippis, 2012).

Policy talk regarding the importance of holding principals accountable for school performance translated into policy actions. For example, the era saw the development of various state and local accountability systems that mandated that principals were expected to *improve* student and school academic performance or face dire consequences for failing to do so (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). Previous scholarship has also documented how, in urban areas, city and district leaders used rhetoric and symbolic actions to anoint principals as having central responsibility for school performance. Suggestive of this “no excuses” approach, one urban superintendent, while she was being filmed for a television documentary, removed a principal (who was off-camera and unseen) from their position for lack of progress toward school improvement (Peck & Mullen, 2010).

Extending the focus on principal responsibility soon after the decade ended, new state school principal standards developed just years earlier were revised to include a focus on holding school leaders accountable for student outcomes as measured by test scores. In Florida, the state’s receipt of federally-distributed Race to the Top grant funding in 2010

prompted revision of the state's school principal standards (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). The standards, as revised November 15, 2011, included as a first item, "Effective school leaders achieve results on the school's student learning goals" with the accompanying clarification, "Student learning results are evidenced by the student performance and growth on statewide assessments; district-determined assessments that are implemented by the district under Section 1008.22, F.S.; international assessments; and other indicators of student success adopted by the district and state" (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

Accumulating in policy talk and action over the decade of the 2000s, then, was the central idea that principals must accept ultimate responsibility for school academic performance.

DISCUSSION

We have examined how, over the last decade, three interrelated, principal-centric policy themes in the US have helped perpetuate rather than curtail the idea that principals must be superheroes. Given this operational environment of superhuman expectations for principals and low tolerance for those who fail to fulfill these lofty ideals, we note two implications: possible negative personal effects from increased principal turnover and an apparent overreliance on principals as a silver bullet policy solution.

The subject of principal turnover has gained notice as accountability metrics have become the essential yardstick for measuring school success in the US. On the one hand, studies have characterized principal turnover as an intentional, salubrious after-effect of accountability consequences that force poor performers from their positions (Ladd, 1999), though a recent study demonstrated that such principals may actually just transition to other schools (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012). On the other hand, negative effects of frequent school leadership changes, such as "teacher turnover increases with principal turnover," have also received attention (Fuller, Orr, & Young, 2008, p. 1). Whatever the immediate, substantive effects of principal turnover, the lasting question we developed from our findings is philosophical: where will we find future candidates who are fit and willing to serve in such a pressure-filled yet operationally-constrained position?

A second implication of our study is underscoring the extent to which the principalship has been increasingly promoted as a favored space from which to leverage school reform. Offering perspective from the White House, a report from a Wallace Foundation-led school leadership conference quoted US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stating, "if at the end of the day, our 95,000 schools each had a great principal, this thing [school improvement] would take care of itself" (Wallace Foundation, 2010, p. 21). Adding to this sense that principals can make a significant difference in school achievement, studies have emerged demonstrating that focusing on principals is also cost-effective as compared to reform efforts targeting other K-12 stakeholders such as teachers (Butrymowicz, 2011). Apparently, not only is principal reform a silver bullet, but it is also a cheap one. However, creating a context in which we expect 95,000 principals to be superheroes is destined to lead to disappointment. As Superman, Spiderman and Wonder Woman would tell you, only a select few can be imbued with extraordinary powers. Expecting every school leader to possess such super abilities is simply a debilitating fantasy.

CONCLUSION

Copland warned in 2001 that we must, “deflate the pervasive myth of principal as everything to everyone” (p. 532). In the intervening decade, school-leader-focused policy talk and action centered on accentuating the important role principals play in school improvement and emphasizing that principals must distribute leadership. The idea that principals must accept ultimate responsibility for school performance emerged as a third policy theme. This triad of policymaker expectations interacted in ways that appeared to inflate rather than deflate the notion that only superheroes need apply for a school leadership position. The fallout from policies that increasingly expect superprincipals *to be even more* is diminished physical health, mental health difficulties, burnout, and frequently, early departure from the profession (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010).

If the past is any indication, policymakers’ tendency to imbue principals with superhero qualities will only continue. A recent opinion article in *Education Week*, for instance, declared, “until we have outstanding leadership in every school, we will not achieve teacher effectiveness—nor significantly improved student-learning outcomes—at scale” and “teachers are critical, but we cannot forget that it is the principal who is best positioned to ensure successive years of quality teaching for every child” (Briggs, Davis, & Cheney, 2012, p. 3). Ironically, then, even as the thrust for distributed leadership increased over the last decade, school-based leaders continue to be positioned to feel the central onus for enabling school greatness. Such escalated, taxing expectations underscore our responsibility as school leadership scholars to research and disseminate skills and tactics all principals can use to cope personally as they strive relentlessly to lead others.

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