

Emerging Challenges Facing School Principals

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This article provides insights into the challenges facing US public school principals. A survey was sent to a random sample of over 10,000 principals throughout the US. Written responses from a representative sample were analyzed for content and themes. Results indicate that principals are facing emerging challenges never before seen in education, including the overwhelming effects of poverty, increasing pressures on student achievement, the breakdown of communities, lack of financial resources, and a host of other issues, many of which coalesce to further complicate the work of principals. The voices of these principals suggest a need to radically rethink our preparation programs for school administrators.

Introduction

The role of the school leader is changing even more rapidly than the changes in schools themselves (Bossi, 2007; Ediger, 2014; Fullan, 2001). A recent national survey summed up findings by stating, “Most principals say that their responsibilities today have changed compared to five years ago and that the job has increased in complexity” (MetLife, 2013, p. 23). In order to be successful, the principal in today’s public schools must not only cope with the administration of a complex human organization in the rapidly evolving dynamics of schools and society, but also must be an effective leader in a wide variety of areas with an increasing emphasis on the achievement of all students (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; Elmore, 2007; Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Those who prepare the educational leaders of tomorrow must be aware of the emerging issues that principals face and it is to that audience that this article is primarily directed. University preparation programs certainly need to prepare future school principals with the knowledge and skills to manage the organization, but also to provide effective instructional leadership that can lead to increasing academic achievement of all students (Conley, 2010; Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson & Merchant, 2014; Gronn, 2003; Jean-Marie, Normore & Brooks, 2009). But these aren’t the only challenges that leaders must be prepared for; recent literature notes other changes in our schools and their communities, including but not limited to an increase in minority student enrollment (Grigg, 2012; Holme, Diem & Welton, 2014; Maxwell, 2014), the primary language of many children and their parents no longer being English (Cline, Crafter & Prokopiou, 2014; Zarate & Pineda, 2014), the devastating poverty in the lives of so many students and their communities (Haig, 2014), the effects of bullying and cyberbullying of students on and off the school grounds (O’Brennan, Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2014), and the increasing difficulty in creating and maintaining a positive school climate and culture that are considered so important to current school success (Kallestad, 2010). Many of these issues mirror changes in our society and school leaders must be prepared to deal with them.

This article began as a national research study on educational leadership coaching conducted by Wise and Cavazos (2015). In this mixed methods study, a single question on the survey instrument asked school principals to describe major challenges that they face. The original purpose of the qualitative data we requested was to extend our understanding of the quantitative results (Creswell, Shope, Plano, Green & Green, 2006). An astonishing 90.8% of school principals, busy as they are, responded to that open-ended question. We received 1,236 written responses to that single question, many a paragraph or more in length that indicated a great need to share the input of principals regarding the increasingly difficult job that they face each and every day. This article is dedicated to that purpose of sharing important voices from the field while providing insights to those who teach educational leadership in master’s and doctoral programs.

Methods

A review of the literature, described in our previous article (Wise & Cavazos, 2015), provided a theoretical framework of leadership coaching and the challenges faced by school principals upon which survey questions were developed. The survey questionnaire was sent to a representative cross-sectional sample of public school principals across the US ($n = 10,424$). To obtain a representative sample, we contracted a national market research firm (<http://www.school data.com>) specializing in education products including a database containing the current email addresses of approximately 70 to 75% of all public school principals in the US. We requested a randomly-selected list of approximately 10,000 email addresses of public school principals, which was the maximum amount we could budget for, stratified by the overall percentages of principals in their database at each of three levels: elementary, middle/junior high, and high school. Email addresses were randomly selected by the market research firm for 6,827 (65.5%) elementary principals, 1,509 (14.5%) middle school/junior high principals, and 2,088 (20.0%) high school principals for a total of 10,424 email addresses. The market research firm sent emails to all the principals selected with a message from us and a link to our survey. A limitation of this methodology was that we did not have access to those principals who did not respond to the email request and consequently were unable to send follow-up emails to non-respondents.

A total of 1,361 usable surveys were received, divided into elementary (835/61.4%), middle/junior (191/14.0%), and high school (323/23.7%) levels, plus 12 responses that did not indicate their principalship level for an overall response rate of 13.1%. Responses were received from all states of the US. While there are limitations to the sample due to the stratified random sampling technique, the sample size, and closely matching percentages of levels of respondents with the population of school principals, we believe that the sample does adequately represent the population of public school principals. According to Patten (2007), for the total population of almost 100,000 public school principals, a representative random sample would be a total of 384 participants. With a response of 1,361 participants, we consider the sample to be representative not only of the population of public school principals in the US, but also for the larger subgroups derived from the sample. Table 1 provides information regarding surveys sent and returned completed.

Table 1
Surveys Sent and Returned Completed

Level	Sent		Returned	
Elementary	6,827	65.5%	835	61.4%
Middle/Jr. High	1,509	14.5%	191	14.0%
High School	2,088	20.0%	323	23.7%
Level not indicated	---	---	12	0.9%
Overall	10,424	100.0%	1,361	100.0%

The survey instrument contained 34 questions in total. The first part of the survey contained questions regarding demographics of the principals, including level of the school, state, location (rural, suburban, urban), number of students, years in the principalship, and if they had received leadership coaching or not. One additional question was asked to frame the circumstances of leadership coaching that they receive: What are the major challenges that you face as a principal?

Of the 1,361 surveys received, 1,236 responded to this question, providing a response rate of 90.8%. Such a high response rate to an open-ended question, in itself, is an indication of the enormity of the challenges facing principals. While some principals responded with a few words, many responded with sentences or even paragraphs detailing the challenges they faced.

The 1,236 responses were uploaded into nVivo software and analyzed using open and axial coding, providing both thematic and content analysis. A total of 2,504 separate items were coded. Essentially, a concurrent embedded strategy (Creswell, 2006) was utilized to analyze the data, because:

The concurrent embedded model can be used to serve a variety of purposes. Often, this model is used so that a researcher can gain broader perspectives as a result of using the different methods as opposed to using the predominant method alone. . . . One method could be used within a framework of the other method. (p. 215)

Challenges that School Principals Face in the United States

Analysis of the responses to the open-ended question yielded six major themes and a number of related and other themes. Table 2 provides information on how many times a particular theme was mentioned by principals. Since a principal might have mentioned more than one theme in her/his response, the results total more than 100%. While a weakness of such content analysis is that a participant may have mentioned a particular theme multiple times and another may not have mentioned it at all (Berg, 2009), we noted that themes were rarely duplicated within responses but rather the respondent added additional, different themes to the response.

Table 2
Major challenges facing principals in the US

	n	% of total responses
Financial resources	486	19.4%
Home/community issues	445	17.8%
Test scores/accountability	325	13.0%
Instruction/assessment	301	12.0%
Lack of time	179	7.1%
Too many responsibilities	172	6.9%
All other responses	596	23.8%
Total	2504	100.0%

After completion of coding, responses that typified each theme were identified. Those responses that best represented each theme were then selected and linked to the respondent's demographic information. These responses offered insights into each of the themes and gave a voice to the principals through quotes that are provided along with the level of the school of the principal responding, school context (rural, suburban, or urban), and location (state). Where the principal was new to the position or had many years of service, this was also indicated. In this manner, our desire was to paint a picture of representative responses from principals and schools throughout the nation. To accurately represent the written comments, we copied them exactly as they were written, including any spelling and grammatical errors.

Financial Resources

As seen in Table 1, a lack of financial resources was the main theme identified and was mentioned in almost 20% of the responses. Within this major theme, the primary issue identified was lack of funding from the state. A first year high school principal from a rural area in Idaho wrote,

Few resources and few electives all due to financial cutbacks. Our state ranks second-to-last in per-student expenditures (thank you, Utah) and our hands are very tied as far as budgets go. I have not had a budget all year as the district has chosen to freeze budgets in case there is a mid-year hold back. We struggle to offer kids the same education that prior groups have had. We are short-handed everywhere while expectations keep rising. Everyone is being asked to do more for less money. A lot of young teachers in our bldg. make less now than they did 3-4 years ago.

While this particular response was longer than most, it contained similar issues commented on by many principals.

A junior high school principal from a rural area of New York mentioned another problematic aspect of finances—that of equity: “- equity of opportunity for socioeconomically disadvantaged students...”

Other principals voiced similar challenges that resulted from reduced funding and consequent concerns over cutting of programs. An 11th year high school principal from Minnesota wrote,

Cuts in funding and the cuts in programs that go with them. We have a very good school and one that has many interventions for students that struggle. These interventions are at risk of being cut. This is not unusual for schools but a big frustration. We know what and how to do it we are just getting cut financially to the point that we can't make it without cuts that hurt students and their education.

Yet another response from a 12th year elementary principal in a rural area of Montana spoke to staffing implications resulting from the loss of financial support, “Lack of funding from the State to maintain staffing for low teacher student ratios.” Another response mentioning the difficulties of reaching high standards with scarce resources came from a suburban elementary principal in Oregon, “Aligning ever decreasing funding with ever increasing expectations.” It is worth noting that nearly all of the

responses regarding the lack of adequate financial support mentioned the detrimental effect on students.

Home and Community Issues

Home and community issues made up the next major theme with almost a fifth (17.8%) of the responses mentioning some aspect of the impact of issues and changes occurring in the home and local community. Several sub-themes were identified within the general theme. The lack of parental and/or community involvement and support was mentioned by most of the principals who wrote responses corresponding to this category. Also included in this theme were student population issues related to home and community including poverty, gangs, bullying, apathy of parents and students, and the home language of parents being other than English. A sixth year elementary principal from a suburban area of Oklahoma wrote, "Parent involvement is a challenge. Parents are not being accountable for their children's actions in regards to their behavior, respect for authority, and just basic skills." A suburban New York state high school principal wrote, "Changing demographics of school. Students and families that have multiple needs that affect their education."

Other principals referred more specifically to the challenges of the local homes and community of their schools. An eighth year elementary principal from an urban New York area wrote, "Community violence, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence. Large number of students in foster care. Large special needs population - 35%. One parent families over 50%. 98% of our students receive free or reduced lunch. Large number of students suffering with asthma."

The issues of home and community are not limited to urban or suburban areas. Many rural principals mentioned related challenges that they increasingly face. A second year elementary principal from a rural area of Illinois wrote, "The constant challenge is fighting the effects of an ever growing number of at-risk students who face greater challenges at home that seem to be brought into school more every year." A elementary principal from a rural area of Arizona close to the Mexican border wrote,

High mobility rate over 40% and over 90% free and reduced lunch. We are close to the border (w/in 25 miles) and many families go to relatives homes for extended weekends, leaving Thursday after school and not returning until Tuesday. Thus our absent rates are high and our average daily attendance is between 89-93 percent.

Another rural principal, this one from a middle school in Indiana, wrote of the challenges of establishing a culture of learning and of concerns that social networking have brought to the development of students,

1) Establishing a school climate/culture of learning (this problem is reflective of the community); 2) Interpersonal/Intrapersonal development concerns in the age of social networking (issues with bullying & cyberbullying and its affect on the healthy emotional and cognitive development of young adolescents).

An elementary principal from an urban district in Colorado referred to a major shift in the home language of her school population, "Most of my students (over 50%) come to school not knowing English. Additionally, because they come from very

impoverished homes in their native countries (mostly Mexico), many of the parents are not literate in their native language.”

A high school principal from rural Oklahoma made a statement regarding apathy. This particular challenge was echoed by many other principals. “Student and parent apathy are increasing making it difficult to engage students in rigorous curriculum aims.”

Surprisingly, gang activity and related problems were mentioned by principals not only in urban, but also in suburban and rural areas and at all school levels. An elementary principal from urban North Carolina stated the problem succinctly, “95% poverty, gangs, crime, limited parent involvement.” A suburban high school principal in California appeared to link the gang issue to reading level, “...significant gang activity; ready availability of illegal drugs; high percentage of students reading below grade level.” An urban elementary principal from California made a link to the community, “...impact of poverty and gang activity in the neighborhood.”

Test Scores/Accountability

Issues related to the strains of continually raising test scores and the pressures of accountability were next in overall percent of all responses (13.0%). Three primary subthemes were identified within this major theme: Pressures from above for NCLB (No Child Left Behind) compliance and scores, Subgroups not meeting AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) goals, and Testing not aligned with 21st century learning needs.

An eighth year elementary principal from a rural area of Texas wrote of the compliance and AYP issues, “Maintaining high test scores on the State test (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) while the test changes and becomes increasingly more difficult.” Similarly, a sixth year high school principal from an urban district in Colorado wrote, “A significant increase in testing this year has reduced our instructional time. Teachers, students, and administrators are stressed. The result is too much data that we do not have time to do anything with.” Another response, this one from an 18th year veteran elementary principal in an urban area of California seemed to carry quite a bit of emotion:

Too many meetings, too much paperwork, RAISING TEST SCORES, too many time consuming useless tasks, finding time to supervise instruction; fewer and fewer resources and support, yet more and more work! Too much emphasis and focus put on test scores and not enough placed on the quality of instruction - - teaching to the test instead of delivering high quality, rigorous, standards-based instruction!

A middle school principal from rural Ohio mentioned a challenge with invalid data being used for accountability purposes: “State and federal mandates of accountability. The ‘data’ they shove down our throats is not valid data, thus all our planning and focus is on measures that do not truly measure student success.” This concern was identified in other responses as well. A high school principal from rural Virginia mentioned a common concern relative to state and federal standards not being the same: “meeting AYP goals, even though we meet state standards.”

A middle school principal from suburban Texas was one of several mentioning the 21st Century learning needs: “Balancing state expectations/standards/assessments/accountability with high quality 21st century education.” A principal of a large suburban

high school in Ohio had this to say, “NCLB and associated types of accountability minimize the importance of problem solving, thinking skills, creativity, and 21st century skills like use of technology, resource utilization...”

Instruction/Assessment

Another major theme mentioned in slightly fewer (12.0%) responses was focused on teaching, curriculum, and the use of assessments to drive learning. Several subthemes were identified within the major theme including helping teachers change/improve instruction to meet the needs of changing student populations, moving away from authentic assessment, and an increasingly narrowed curriculum. A high school principal from a rural district in Mississippi wrote, “Changing the instructional culture to data driven decision making; changing teacher thought process from grade base to skill mastery.” A middle school principal from rural Georgia brought up the issue of interventions, “Implementing the Tier 2 interventions for our struggling learners. Impacting student achievement for all AYP student sub-groups.”

A number of principals mentioned the emerging challenges of teaching students that may not have been in regular classrooms a few years ago. A middle school principal from suburban California wrote, “Increased number of high risk special education students that are attempting to attend a “regular” school with supports in place. The number of ED students is rising faster than our capacity to accommodate them.” Similarly, an elementary principal from an urban district in Massachusetts stated, “Teaching many students whose first language is not English.”

Like many respondents, a high school principal from suburban Washington referred to challenges present in the areas of teaching and curriculum:

1. Continue to meet evolving state exit exam standards with a high-risk, alternative student population and dwindling resources.
2. Continue to deliver "out-of-the box" education in a climate of narrowing curriculum and options.
3. Continue to meet the needs of a diverse student population in the midst of a conversion or narrowing of curriculum expectations.

An elementary principal from rural Minnesota mentioned another topic brought up by many--the need for much more coaching of teachers, “A move towards my time being spent with teachers rather than students. Much more individual teacher coaching...”

A junior high principal from an urban district in California mentioned several challenges regarding teachers that were also mentioned by other principals,

Helping teachers change practice to better meet the needs of students, focus on learning rather than teaching, ... technology comfort levels of more experienced teachers, us vs. them attitude, ... teacher attitudes that only some students can learn (those that want to learn), driven by the master schedule, union contracts...

Lack of Time

Of the respondents, a fair percentage (7.1%) directly mentioned a lack of time to do what principals need to do or tasks that are time consuming as a significant challenge. Many respondents wrote about what they wanted to do but couldn't while others mentioned

having to take shortcuts that were not adequate solutions. A middle school principal from suburban Iowa communicated the lack of, “Time to complete administrative requirements and provide instructional leadership concurrently.”

Within the issue of time, several principals mentioned that central/district office meetings kept them away from school too much. A high school principal in a Texas suburb stated,

Meetings called by people in admin building that require excessive time off campus. They are to be a support to building principals, not hindrances. Many of the reports they ask for they have the information and staff to put that information in the proper format for those reports. Very difficult for building principal to spread the message and vision when we are hardly on campus due to admin meetings.

An elementary principal from an urban California district wrote, “The most significant challenge is finding time to do everything that is required of the job with full effort. I don't feel I have enough time to do everything well.” Another, this one a first year principal from rural Michigan, stated the challenge concisely, “Too much to do and not enough time to manage it all.”

A sixth year elementary principal from suburban West Virginia seemed to shout frustration when responding:

TIME!!!! There is not ample time to plan and present staff development, handle discipline, improve parent involvement, reward students and staff, complete necessary paperwork, & document every time you speak to someone. This all needs done AND we need to be in classrooms 50% of our time. There just is not enough of me OR enough time to do all of the necessary tasks well.

Too many responsibilities

A theme mentioned in slightly less (6.9)% of the responses was that of having simply too many responsibilities to be able to do an adequate job. Many principals felt completely overwhelmed. While this theme is related to time, many comments approached this as a separate theme. For example, a number of principals responded regarding the number of new initiatives taken on in a short amount of time. A 3rd year elementary principal from an urban district in New Mexico listed several initiatives,

Too many initiatives started at one time. We have continuous school improvement, a new language arts curriculum, PDSA, new administrative software, addition of new programs at the building level, after school programs, web EPSS, etc. All way too many things to do and do well. I feel splintered and not as effective as I could be if I could focus on a few initiatives. I have counted that we have 15 new initiatives currently running this year alone, on top of the many new initiatives that were started last year. Overwhelming.

Other principals mentioned the challenges of being both a manager and an instructional leader with so much to do. An elementary principal from rural Colorado described the situation with these words, “Balancing the expectations of the office (discipline, attendance issues, parent issues, classroom/staffing coverage) with the expectations of being an instructional leader throughout the building (teacher

observations/evaluations, grade level collaborations, designing and coordinating professional development opportunities).”

Like many other respondents, a high school principal from a large school in an urban area of California seemed to take this question about significant challenges as an opportunity to vent frustration,

Seriously? How much time do you have? Balancing required management duties with my role as instructional leader is #1 challenge. Dealing with adults: Difficult and/or demanding parents, Incompetent or mediocre teachers. Continuing to do more with less (all resources- people and supplies/materials).

Some principals had much to say. The most comprehensive response came from a second year high school principal working in a suburb in Oregon,

Boy... the list is really long. At this point, the top challenges I face include:

- Maintaining a positive and inspiring climate for teachers during budget cuts and a political culture that attacks teachers (for example, the ideas that come Waiting for Superman).
- AYP... we have a "needs improvement" designation and are designing and implementing interventions, which we hope are successful. This has been positive and meaningful but hard work.
- SIP- We are revamping our school improvement plan to meet the above need and new grad requirements in Oregon... this has been great but tough work.
- Sheer volume of work- This is a great school and very meaningful work... but the sheer volume of things to do is overwhelming. For instance, I started my workday at 6:30 am and I am completing this survey at 5:15 pm. I will go to the gym, have dinner with my wife and work until 11:30 pm or later... I try to be efficient but so much troubleshooting has to occur. Whew...

Other principals were more terse in their responses. One elementary principal from an urban New Mexico district stated the issue clearly, “I don’t have time to answer that, which is the challenge.” A first year principal from a very large school (1,013 students) in rural Pennsylvania simply wrote, “The list is too long.” Finally, an elementary principal from a suburban area of California summed up the many emerging challenges faced by school principals throughout the country in one word, “Everything.”

Other challenges

There were other noteworthy challenges mentioned by the principals responding to the survey that had fewer responses than those noted above. Those mentioned included district/state/federal issues, special-needs students, teacher morale and teacher resistance, student behavior, technology, union problems and a host of yet others, some mentioned only one to three times.

Conclusion

The responses cited in this paper represent only a small portion of the many, many written statements by principals, who, busy as they are, took time from their day to write about their challenges in response to a single question on a survey sent to them electronically. A glance at the entire set of responses, which takes up a full 74 pages, single-spaced, indicates that public school principals face emerging challenges that make

their work difficult and at times, impossible to do well. The responses are telling of a group of leaders, serving in the relatively prestigious position of school principal, trying to do their very best with limited resources and time. It is of note that these leaders are fairly well-paid professionals (the median salary for principals was about \$88,000 as of May 2010) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015) who are, in general, very carefully selected for their positions.

This article was written primarily for those who prepare these educational leaders. Current university courses of preparation rarely deal with many of the challenges that were mentioned by so many principals whose voices were shared here. These are not regional challenges as seen by the responses; they are found in schools of every type and in every location throughout the entire country.

How do we support these principals in facing the challenges they have so articulately pointed out? How do we prepare principals for what is becoming an overwhelming task? These are just some of the questions that are suggested by the responses from principals.

One thing is clear: We cannot continue to prepare school principals in the same way we have done for far too long. Indeed, there are some innovations in the field. Some schools of education are beginning to include longer and more extensive fieldwork and internship opportunities in schools that are carried out in collaboration with the school leadership of those schools. Standards for preparation that once were more generic and sometimes vague and overarching now require quite specific tasks to be completed in a school setting. We are moving from preparation programs that involved quite a bit of reading and writing to programs that also include performance tasks. The more that preparation programs can actually prepare leaders for the kinds of issues they will face on a daily basis, the better off the profession will be and the better off the students in those schools will be.

However, the larger questions remain: Are we preparing future leaders with the skills and knowledge to deal with rapid change in their schools and communities? Are we providing them with tools that are flexible enough to meet the evolving needs voiced by current principals? Are we preparing them with an equity lens to ensure that traditionally underserved populations will receive the assistance they need? Are we helping them to develop collaborative networks that they can participate in and call upon when needed? Are we injecting in them a passion for this all-important work so vital to our future? Have we reached the point of crisis in our national public educational system? It is our job to seek solutions and we must do so now.

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