

Leadership Development Model for Shelby County Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine factors impacting program quality in leadership development programs as a means to inform the Shelby County School System of effective practices in leadership development. The qualitative research design method was used to explore two school systems identified through a comprehensive review of research as having exemplary leadership development programs. Telephone interviews were conducted with personnel responsible for the implementation of their school system's leadership development program. A set of predetermined questions were utilized in the interviews. Respondents were asked to elaborate on the unique qualities of their leadership development program, as well as, offer recommendations on how to begin the process of developing a quality program. As a result of this study, school systems should develop programs based on research and revealed implications providing a robust program easily adapted for aspiring leaders, as well as those currently in leadership positions.

Key Words: Leadership Development; Leadership Training; School Administration; Leadership Effectiveness; Leadership Development Models.

Perhaps United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, said it best when he stated, “There are no good schools without good principals” (2009). The vision of the Shelby County School System is to be the model for excellence in education. As stated in his letter of request to become a client of Samford University (March 6, 2015), current Superintendent Randy Fuller wanted this vision to be fulfilled and thereby requested a study of best practices in leadership development. The purpose of this study was to engage in a reflective critique of exemplary leadership development programs and to offer recommendations to the Shelby County School Superintendent concerning exemplary practices of a leadership development program. Superintendent Fuller wants to continuously develop leaders who will carry on the vision of being a model of excellence in education. As a means to that end, the authors researched exemplary leadership development programs in a review of the literature and by interviewing leaders from two programs. The research was designed to provide valuable data, insight, and direction to the Shelby County School System as it attempts to create and implement a leadership development program. The focus of this study was on content, delivery methods, and other factors that impact program quality from school systems that are nationally recognized to provide exemplary, purposeful leadership development programs.

Significance of Leadership

Gene Bottoms, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) senior vice-president iterated the need to have to have skilled principals who know a lot more about curriculum and instruction and how to work with faculty in creating the conditions for improved student achievement (Olson, 2007). In addition to improving student achievement, research showed evidence that a principal can affect variables such as parents’ perceptions of the school, teachers’ decisions about where to work and teachers’ satisfaction (Rice, 2010). Rice (2010) also found low-achieving, high-poverty schools tend not to have effective principals.

Robert Eaker noted it is virtually impossible to re-culture school or school districts into high-performing professional learning communities without widely dispersed, high-quality leadership (Buffum, 2008 p. vii). The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) also reported “On day one, principals should be able to blend their energy, knowledge and professional skills to collaborate with, and motivate others to transform school learning environments in ways that ensure all students will graduate college and career ready” (CCSSO, 2012, p. 3).

Leadership and Student Achievement

Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) described leadership as providing direction and exercising influence. In a six-year study of the effects of state, district, and school leadership on student learning, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 43 school districts in nine states. This study noted among school-related factors influencing student learning, leadership is second to teaching. The study further showed, “To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 9). In the report, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: Review of Research*, the authors found “There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented

leaders. While other factors within the school also contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst” (Wahlstrom, Leithwood, Louis, & Anderson, 2010, p. 35).

Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, and Cravens (2007) built on this concept stating high standards and rigorous learning goals must be in place for student learning. Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Portin (2010) defined leadership as “the shared work and commitments that shape the direction of a school or district and their learning improvement agendas, and that engage effort and energy in pursuit of those agendas” (p. 4).

A principal must engage all stakeholders so learning is the focus of both adults and students. Goldring et al., (2007) described a healthy school environment as one that is not only safe and orderly, but one in which the central focus is student learning. Teachers are an integral part of the equation and must be engaged in professional learning communities whose focus is improving instruction.

District Role in Leadership Development

The importance of district support has also been reported in *The District Leadership Challenge* (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). In this study 22 high school principals were interviewed. In the most-improved schools, principals felt there was a collaborative relationship established with the district. In contrast, principals in the least-improved high schools felt that reform initiatives were implemented from the district level. Principals in the most-improved schools also report that districts allowed principals to make most decisions concerning school improvement, while the principals in the least-improved schools indicated districts held tight control over decision making. The authors further held “even the most talented and best-trained principals will fail if their working conditions do not support their improvement efforts” (Bottoms & Fry, 2009, p. iii).

In 2007, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen researched exemplary leadership development programs. They found exemplary in-service programs were organized in curriculum and instruction to continually develop leaders in processes such as developing school-wide direction and goals, observing and providing feedback to teachers, providing quality professional development and learning experiences for teachers, guiding school improvement efforts through the use of data, and establishing learning communities. Further, exemplary programs typically provided mentoring, collaborative networks, peer coaching, and school visits by colleagues.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) conducted a survey of principals in 2008 and found its members spend approximately two percent of their time on improving their skills through professional learning. A Public Agenda Report released in 2003 stated 96% of principals surveyed felt their colleagues were more helpful in their preparation for administration than graduate courses (NEA Policy Brief, 2008). Leadership training and development is often overlooked or pushed aside to focus on other issues. Vanderbilt’s Joseph F. Murphy stated, “Most (professional development) for principals is not consistent with our best understanding of how learning occurs” (Prothero, 2015, p.10). Most school leaders attend a university for administrative training, but as Mitgang and Gill (2012) stated “equally important is the training and support school leaders receive after they’re hired” (p. 24).

New Leaders (2013) identified through case studies three key roles of effective principals beyond that of building manager. These are instructional leader, human capital manager and culture builder. To provide an atmosphere which enables principals to be successful, districts

should focus on four key strands: (1) Alignment among goals, strategies, structures and resources, (2) culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement, (3) effective management and support for principals and (4) system and policies to effectively manage talent at the school level (Ikemoto, Taliaferro & Davis, 2014). In a survey of almost 1,000 principals, Whitmire (2012) found that over half feel they would be more effective with continuous development.

In an article submitted to *Education Leadership*, Fullan (2009) reasons that although instructional leadership has come to the forefront of the leadership role; few are prepared to implement this practice. He asserts that leaders will need job-embedded learning, system-embedded leadership and learning, and organizationally-embedded leadership to carry out these duties. While many programs provide job-embedded leadership, these develop the individual leader. To improve the structure of the organization, there must be “shared learning in the setting in which you work” (Fullan, 2009). System-embedded leadership features a collective responsibility throughout the district.

Summary

Districts have a responsibility to create conditions where leaders can learn and practice effective skills. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) reported, “The vision and actions of system leaders and school board members frequently determine whether principals can be effective in leading school improvement. Districts cannot necessarily make weak principals succeed, but we have seen too many districts create conditions in which even good principals are likely to fail” (p. i).

States and districts must define what skills and competencies leaders should have and plan training and development based on these standards. While many states use ISLLC standards, Alabama developed its own set of standards (Schmidt-Davis, 2011). There are numerous models of essential skills that a district may use in conjunction with Alabama standards.

When standards and essential skills are present, districts may begin to support their leaders by providing professional development. The Wallace Foundation initiative “reflects the belief that districts can do much to develop and support principals as effective instructional leaders if they reshape traditional, often haphazard preparation and hiring processes for aspiring principals and if they restructure evaluation and support for new principals” (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2015, p. 2).

Method

Research Design and Questions

The researchers examined factors impacting program quality in leadership development programs as a means to inform the Shelby County School System of effective practices in leadership development. The study explored two exemplary leadership development programs in the southeast United States. Specifically, the researchers: (a) examined the literature on leadership development programs, (b) included interviews from experts in exemplary leadership development programs across the country, (c) reviewed the structure of content and delivery methods, and (d) noted components related to strong leadership development programs. The researchers then offered recommendations related to the development of a leadership development model for the Shelby County School System. Research was conducted to provide

insight into best practices and recommendations for a strong, positive, relevant experience for Shelby County aspiring, novice and veteran leaders. The research questions that were addressed in this study included:

- What K-12 school systems are consistently recognized for best practices for leadership development programs?
- What is distinctive in the delivery, content, and practices of the nation's best programs?
- What steps can K-12 school systems take to ensure an outstanding leadership development program for aspiring, novice and veteran leaders?

Methodology & Interview Questions

After IRB approval was granted, expert interviews were conducted with leaders in Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia and Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida. Notes were coded to determine common themes and a qualitative, grounded theory research design was used.

Interview questions were developed to address the characteristics making their program distinct from other leadership development programs. The specific interview questions were:

- Your leadership development program has been recognized as one of the top in the nation throughout the literature. To what do you attribute your success?
- What makes your program different from other leadership development programs?
- How do you impact the content and delivery in your program? How do you assess for participant understanding?
- Explain how your leadership development program equips your school leaders for success.
- What components of your leadership development program do you consider to be most beneficial to your participants? How did you arrive at these components?
- How has your leadership development program changed in recent years?
- How do you evaluate your leadership development program?
- How did you develop your curriculum? Who developed it?
- Do you have mentors? Who trains those mentors?
- How do you fund your program?
- Do you have a succession plan of training?

Results

Implications for Practice

The following are implications and recommendations for creating an effective leadership development program that resulted from this study:

- When creating a program, it is important for everyone to have collective responsibility for the program.
- Leadership competencies or standards should be developed. These standards should be the basis of all leadership training and development.
- Program curriculum should be developed by district personnel. This allows leaders to understand expectations from the district.
- Training should be provided by district personnel.

- A cohort model allows the opportunity to create relationships that may stimulate professional collaboration.
- Training cohorts should be based on vacancy forecasting. Begin training with one cohort group and expand as needed.
- It is imperative to stay current on research in the area of leadership development. Resources used should be based on this research.
- Mentors and/or coaches are a vital part of leader support.
- Training should include problem solving scenarios, videos, and other elements to engage the learner.

These findings from two exemplary programs provide direction for a system creating a leadership development program.

Conclusions

This study led to several conclusions concerning developing a leadership development program. Based on the results of the qualitative research, there are common elements which contribute to an effective leadership development program. The initial planning stage should involve various leaders to create a unified appreciation and commitment to the program. Standards or competencies should be based on the non-negotiables the district has set. Training and development should be provided by those who know the system best. Various resources and methods should be used during the training sessions. Mentoring and/or coaching should be provided to leaders to monitor implementation of the standards and training. These individuals should be well-versed in expectations of the district. By implementing the findings of this study, leaders will be better prepared for their roles.

Although there were many similarities between the two districts studied, it should be noted that a small sample size was used. It would be beneficial for the researchers to continue to identify exemplary programs and study the effective practices of those programs. Program components could be modified based on new research, program analysis, and participant feedback.

Recommendations for Shelby County Schools

A Framework for Leadership Development has been created by the researchers. This framework is based on the current Instructional Framework for Shelby County Schools which utilized a variation of the four critical questions of a Professional Learning Community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Executive leadership should complete this framework as a basis for the leadership development program.

The development of competencies is another key element for the district to create before implementing a leadership development program. Initial work has begun on the competencies and can be found in the appendix. Examples of competencies/standards from the two districts studied were provided for executive leaders in Shelby County Schools to provide exemplars. After discussion and reflection, a draft list was completed. Central office personnel, principals, and assistant principals were all provided the opportunity for input on the draft competencies. Further work will require examining suggestions and amending the competencies as needed for a final product. The draft Leadership Development Framework is included in

Appendix A. Appendix B is a draft of Leader Competencies. This draft will continue to be developed by system leaders.

When the competencies and practices are finalized, the district should begin the process of developing a cohort of leaders. When the cohort is solidified, training modules should be developed that include a variety of resources and methods and are based on the competencies.

Summary

As education and leadership have become more complex in the 21st century, improving professional learning for principals, assistant principals, teachers, and superintendents must be at the forefront of our agenda” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 58). Preparation programs must recognize the importance of leadership and take the necessary steps to adequately prepare and develop school leaders. “Effective principals can do what effective teachers cannot. They can create a climate that encourages learning and achievement, not just in a single classroom but throughout a school” (Syed, 2015, p. 3). With this in mind, training and development must be provided for every level of leader. School systems would do well to develop programs based on the research and implications revealed in this study. This will provide a robust program easily adapted for aspiring leaders, as well as, those currently in a leadership position. These well trained leaders will be able to support the academic development of teachers, which will result in increased student achievement.

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