Rural Elementary Administrators' Views of High-Stakes Testing

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This study examines how rural elementary school administrators perceive the effects of high-stakes testing in comparison to suburban and urban elementary administrators. High-stakes testing had a greater impact, both positively and negatively, on rural administrators than on their counterparts in suburban and urban schools. Specifically, the positive effects were that rural administrators were more motivated by the testing program to do a better job, found the test results more useful in assessing teachers, and found the test results more useful in meeting the academic needs of students. The negative effects were that rural administrators felt more pressure than urban administrators to improve test scores and found their school rating to more negatively affect their ability to attract high quality teachers than administrators in suburban schools.

Introduction

Nearly one in three of America's school-age children attend public schools in rural areas or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people. Yet if you listen to the education policy debate, particularly around the impact of the new 'No Child Left Behind' law, chances are you still will not hear much about rural schools. In most states, they are left behind from the start. (Rural Trust, 2003, p. 1)

Recently, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was implemented with the assumption that it will affect all schools similarly. This study was designed to examine how rural elementary administrators in Florida perceived the effects of high-stakes testing in comparison to suburban and urban elementary administrators. Specifically, we queried elementary administrators about how high-stakes testing had affected their instructional leadership behaviors, their job satisfaction and motivation, and school climate. The intent of this study was to focus on Florida's rural administrators' perceptions of the impact of high-stakes testing on their school and their community.

Given the limited number of studies and the limited nature of data available that address the perceptions of educational leaders and the impact of high-stakes testing, studies that provide richer, more in-depth understandings are greatly needed. If high-stakes testing programs continue to be the golden standard by which our schools are measured, then it is necessary to understand the ways in which these devices are perceived by different localities. Perception is the basis of our reality and affects the beliefs, values, and actions of those in leadership positions.

Literature Review and Background

The Nature of Florida's Rural Schools

According to the Rural School and Community Trust (2003), Florida policymakers need to pay attention to rural education issues. More than 1.7 million people live in rural Florida. This makes Florida the third largest state in the nation relative to rural schools. In addition, Florida has the fourth lowest rate of rural spending on instruction and pupil support nationwide and the eighth lowest rate of computer use in rural classrooms (Rural Trust, 2003). According to Strange, policy director of the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust, 2003), "These factors combine to make rural education in Florida a critical priority for policymakers" (p. 1).

Perceptions of Testing

Few researchers have examined administrators' perceptions of high-stakes testing. Those who have researched this topic have generally concluded that administrators have mixed feelings as to the effects of testing on education. For instance, about half of the principals interviewed by George (2001) found Florida's testing program deeply flawed. Some of the major concerns cited by principals were that high-stakes testing: (a) damaged developmentally appropriate practices; (b) narrowed the definition of school success to increased test scores; (c) increased the pressure on principals, teachers, and students; (d) lowered teacher morale; and (e) relied on rewards and punishments that were unfair.

On the other hand, some principals in this same study found that the high-stakes testing tends to foster higher-level thinking and results in positive changes in content and instruction. In North Carolina, about two-thirds of principals agreed with the overall goals of the state testing program (Ladd & Zelli, 2002). Proponents of formal testing of students in K-12 schools have expressed other positive attributes of this practice, citing that: testing controlled by government agencies allows a level of authority to exercise control over the activities of the local school districts and that testing programs allow for a monitoring process to insure that educational institutions are doing what they have

been charged to do. Many of these proponents view such devices as a means for state leaders to maintain and enhance the quality of education (Natriello & Pallas, 1998).

Other proponents of high-stakes testing have indicated these programs have the potential to influence the behavior of all stakeholders in the educational arena. High-stakes testing is often perceived as a tool that can be used to cause students to pay greater attention to the demands of the educational system, thus devoting greater effort in meeting those demands. Still others have reported that testing programs may be a vehicle used to influence the behavior of teachers and administrators by reporting the results of schools' test scores for public scrutiny. Reporting test results of schools, in a comparative framework, provides a way to guarantee some basic level of accomplishment for students. These perceptions of high-stakes testing are a means of offering quality assurances to the general public that help support the financial needs of educational institutions (Natriello & Pallas, 1998). These factors suggest that there are compelling reasons for the existence of high-stakes testing programs.

According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), most administrators are oblivious to the connection between policy and politics because they are basically non-political. This is not surprising since one era in the history of education was well known for its attempts to rid educators from politics. During the 1980s, educators were cautioned to shy away from politics because they lacked the ability to fight due to the lack of support from professional organizations, the lack of financial backing, and the violent opposition from organized groups or powerful individuals (Pulliam & Patten, 1999). In fact, administrators were discouraged from getting involved in politically controversial positions (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Other researchers have found that administrators have become politically savvy in the role of buffering the school from inappropriate pressures such as those found in standardized testing programs (Bolman & Deal, 1991). This disconnect between politics and education tends be ignored by educators because many of them have a hard time believing that people could make decisions based upon anything but the best interest of children.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) contend that no reform is implemented the way it is intended. In fact, when reform efforts emerge at the federal or state level, there is often little knowledge of the existing complexities that are already in place at the school, district, and community levels. Principals are charged with the responsibility of adapting the reform efforts to fit the existing mold. Often, this creates tension and disagreement and the end result is the "blame game." This occurs when educators blame the reformers when the ideas do not work and the reformers blame educators when the reform efforts are not successful (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Instructional Leadership and Testing

Studies of effective schools indicated that strong instructional leadership is one of the most powerful indicators of success (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979). Instructional leadership involves frequent monitoring of the teaching process to assess the instructional capacity of the educational organization. As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for ensuring that each student has the opportunity to receive a quality education. To do so, administrators and teachers need to work together as colleagues in an effort to help support teaching and learning in schools (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).

In rural communities, the leadership positions are often built on social interaction, mutual trust, and relationships that promote agency trust within the community for the development of the common good. This close relationship allows the rural administrator to adapt testing and accountability policies to the rural expectations. Many rural residents strongly identify with their place of residence and are reluctant to leave it to pursue higher education or careers (DeYoung, 1995; Howley & Howley, 1995; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Theobald, 1997). The relationships developed with other people are given primary concern (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). Direct, verbal communication is the norm because layers of bureaucracy are often lacking compared to urban school models (Nachtigal, 1982).

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCATs)

The high-stakes testing program in Florida, known as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), is a top-down administered accountability system that operates within the traditional public school system. The FCAT was first administered in public schools and used for accountability purposes in the spring of 1999. That was the first year in which schools were assigned a letter grade, ranging from "A" through "F," based on the results of students' test performance (the study described in this paper was conducted during the fourth year of testing, in the spring of 2002). During the year of this study, school grades were directly linked to accountability rewards and sanctions. Schools graded an "A" or that had improved at least one grade level were eligible for monetary incentives.

During the year of this study, the FCAT consisted of a criterion-referenced test that measured the state standards in reading, writing, and mathematics and a norm-referenced test that measured student performance against national norms. The reading and math tests were administered in grades 3 through 10 and the writing test was administered in grades 4, 8, and 10. The FCAT consisted of multiple-choice items at all grade levels tested and "performance items" that required a written answer) in reading (in grades 4, 8, and 10) and in math (in grades 5, 8, and 10). Test results were provided at the student, school, district, and state level.

Local school boards made student retention decisions, although students were required to pass the reading and math FCAT in tenth grade starting in 2002-2003 in order to graduate from high school. More information regarding the FCAT is available online at the FCAT Home Page (Florida Department of Education, 2001).

Method

Participants

The purpose of this study was to compare elementary administrators' perceptions of Florida's high-stakes testing program (FCAT) with respect to the size of the school district. We were most interested in understanding how high-stakes testing had affected *rural* administrators. We also wanted to examine how the perceptions of administrators in rural districts might be similar to or different from administrators in suburban and urban districts.

We surveyed elementary administrators across Florida by inviting all 67 Florida school districts to participate in this study. About half (47.8%) of all districts (32 out of 67 districts) agreed to participate. We received completed surveys from 325 administrators (42 rural administrators, 146 suburban administrators, and 125 urban administrators) that included 212 principals, 96 assistant principals, and 17 who did not indicate their administrative rank. These administrators represented 41.6% of the schools (264 out of 635 schools) within the school districts participating. Fewer surveys were received from rural administrators than suburban and urban administrators because there were fewer schools in the rural districts. The participating rural administrators represented 57.6% of the schools (34 out of 59 schools) within the school districts participating.

Of Florida's 67 districts, we identified 29 (43.3%) as "rural" (less than 8,000 Pre-K to Grade 12 students), 31 (46.3%) as "suburban" (8,000 to 82,000 students), and 7 (10.4%) as "urban" (more than 114,000 students). The percent of districts participating in this study included: 62.1% of rural districts (18 out of 29 rural districts), 35.5% of suburban districts (11 out of 31 suburban districts), and 42.9 % of urban districts (3 out of 7 urban districts). Districts were identified by student enrollment figures and their geographic locations.

Two-thirds of the administrators were female (67.0%) and most were White or Caucasian (87.0%), while 10.8% were Black or African-American, 0.6% were Hispanic, and 1.5% were of another race/ethnicity. Participants

ranged in age from 26 to 63 years old (M = 49.7 years old, SD = 7.0). The principals had an average of 9.9 years of experience as a principal (SD = 6.6) and 4.2 years of experience as an assistant principal (SD = 3.3). The assistant principals had an average of 0.3 years experience as a principal (SD = 1.1) and 5.8 years of experience as an assistant principal (SD = 5.0).

Procedure

All elementary school administrators in the participating districts were contacted a total of three times: twice by electronic mail (email) and once by letter. In the email correspondence we explained the purpose of the anonymous survey and provided them with the Web site URL for the online survey. We sent a paper copy of the survey to those who did not complete the online survey within a couple of weeks.

Survey Instrument

Elementary administrators completed an anonymous online questionnaire that required approximately 20 minutes to complete. Many of the questionnaire items were developed from a survey used by Jones et al. (1999) that we modified and added items to in order to make it relevant to the present study. To limit the possibility of ineligible individuals completing the questionnaire, administrators entered a unique school code assigned to them by us. The questionnaire queried them about demographic information (8 items), as well as their beliefs about the testing program and how the testing has affected their job as an administrator (21 items). In this paper, we report the results of 14 of the non-demographic information items: 11 items required a response on a Likert-format scale, 2 items required a "yes" or "no" response, and one item required a percentage of time.

Results and Discussion

In some respects, rural administrators' responses were similar to those of suburban and urban administrators. In other respects, however, important differences emerged. The purpose of this section is to report the similarities and highlight the differences to better understand how the challenges faced by rural administrators might be different than those faced by administrators in larger districts.

Instructional Leadership

Rural elementary administrators reported spending a similar amount of time each day on instructional leadership as suburban and urban elementary administrators (see Table 1). However, reports of time spent on instructional leadership varied greatly among rural administrators: 47.5% reported spending less than one-third of their time on instructional leadership, 33.3% indicated they spend between 33.3-66.7% of their time on instructional leadership, and 19.1% acknowledged spending more than two-thirds of their time on instructional leadership.

Table 1.

Mean Comparisons by Administrators in Rural, Suburban, and Urban School Districts

Questionnaire item	Rural n = 42 M (SD)	Suburban n = 146 M (SD)	Urban n = 125 M (SD)	F-Value
What percentage of your average day do you spend on instructional leadership?	43.5% (24.6)	44.0% (20.4)	41.0% (21.1)	0.72
How does the FCAT influence your ability to improve teacher effectiveness?[1]	5.24 (1.17)	5.01 (1.31)	4.73 (1.33)	2.95
How <u>useful</u> are the FCAT results for helping you assess <u>teachers'</u> strengths and weaknesses in:				
Reading[2]	4.22[c] (1.42)	4.05[c] (1.41)	3.58[a,b] (1.49)	4.76**
Writing[2]	4.34[c] (1.39)	4.36[c] (1.37)	3.71[a,b] (1.53)	7.55***
Math[2]	4.37[c] (1.39)	4.15[c] (1.37)	3.67[a,b] (1.45)	5.64**
How accurate is the FCAT in assessing students' knowledge and skills in:				
Reading[3]	4.45 (1.15)	4.45[c] (1.14)	4.06[b] (1.01)	4.74**
Writing[3]	4.67 (1.16)	4.74[c] (1.17)	4.29[b] (1.20)	5.16**
Math[3]	4.55 (1.15)	4.61[c] (1.14)	4.19[b] (1.05)	5.07**
What type of effect does the FCAT have on developmentally appropriate practices?				
Reading[4]	4.10 (1.99)	4.21 (1.55)	4.05 (1.44)	0.38
Writing[4]	4.29 (1.82)	4.59 (1.57)	4.14 (1.56)	2.68
Math[4]	4.27 (1.83)	4.38 (1.49)	4.17 (1.42)	0.66

* $p \le .05$; ** $p \le .01$; *** $p \le .001$

[1] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *negatively influences my ability*; 4 = *does not influence my ability*; and 7 = *positively influences my ability*.

[2] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *not useful at all*; 4 = *useful to some degree*; and 7 = *very useful*.

[3] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *not accurate at all*; 4 = *accurate to some degree*; and 7 = *very accurate*.

[4] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *negative effect*; 4 = *no effect*; and 7 = *positive effect*.

Scheffe mean comparisons were used to test all possible pairs. Different superscripts for a particular variable indicate differences between groups at the $p \le .05$ level. Superscript "a" indicates the rural group, "b" indicates the suburban group, and "c" indicates the urban group.

The administrator's role in instructional leadership has become the focus of much research in recent years. Bass and Stogdill (1990) acknowledged that there are almost as many definitions of what constitutes effective leadership, as there are researchers who have studied it. According to Whitaker (1997), principals get caught up in the day-to-day operations of the school dealing with matters that are not directly related to instruction, but are important to the efficient operations of the school. The fact that all elementary administrators in this study indicated that they spent, on average, approximately 42.8% of their day on instructional leadership is encouraging. Several practices that support the administrators' active involvement in instructional leadership practices will be discussed further in this section.

Rural administrators generally found the FCAT results to be more useful to them as instructional leaders than suburban or urban administrators. For instance, there was a marginally significant (p = .054) difference between how the FCAT influenced rural administrators' ability to improve teacher effectiveness compared to suburban and urban administrators (see Table 1). That is, rural administrators found the FCAT to have a more positive influence on their ability to improve teacher effectiveness. In fact, most rural administrators (71.5%) reported that the FCAT had a positive influence on their ability to improve teacher effectiveness; almost a quarter (21.4%) reported that the FCAT did not influence their ability to improve teacher effectiveness, and only 7.1% reported that it negatively influenced their ability.

Rural elementary administrators' use of data to improve teacher effectiveness is an example of leadership behaviors that are valuable for school improvement. This finding is consistent with a study in which two out of three North Carolina administrators reported that the testing program increased their ability to make teachers more effective (Ladd & Zelli, 2002). This supports Schein's (1992) assumptions that the process of supervision can facilitate the improvement of instruction. Hoy and Hoy (2003)

contended that teachers' performance in schools is often determined by the climate of the school in which they work. Instructional leaders that improve school climate are working on a very enduring quality of the school that is experienced by teachers and can positively influence their behaviors and may lead to improved student learning.

Rural and suburban administrators also found the FCAT results more useful than urban administrators in helping them to assess teachers' strengths and weaknesses (see Table 1). This difference was found across the subject areas of reading, writing, and math. Instructional leadership involves assessing and evaluating teacher effectiveness by making judgments and decisions based on outcomes and information to some set of criteria (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). It appears that rural elementary administrators are using the test results in this manner, according to their claims that the test results enabled them to assess teachers' strengths and weakness in reading, writing, and math. Urban administrators found the test results less useful in this regard. In a related study, a few administrators reported that the results provided useful information as to the progress of the school at one point in time (Jones & Egley, 2004a).

These findings indicate that administrators are using the results of the FCAT to make data-driven decisions about teacher effectiveness and assessing teachers' strengths and weaknesses. These examples are related to contemporary models of instructional leadership that stress the importance of using data to make informed decisions for school improvement and other important school outcomes (Murphy & Lewis, 1999). The process of matching strategies to the specific needs of teachers, in an effort to improve their effectiveness, is a positive step to improving student achievement as measured by the FCAT. The use of observational data as part of an ongoing assessment of the instructional program is just another example of how administrators are engaged in instructional leadership. These practices lead to a detailed understanding of the needs of a particular school and/or population. Using data-driven decisions to meet higher expectations and generate local support, rural administrators can better document their efforts and refine their strategies. An emphasis on

continuous evaluation helps administrators monitor the changes in programmatic and instructional processes, and provides the necessary means to assess whether students and schools are achieving their desired goals.

Assessing Students' Knowledge and Skills

Administrators found the FCAT to be somewhat accurate in assessing students' knowledge and skills (see Table 1). Rural administrators did not perceive the FCAT to be more or less accurate in assessing students' abilities than the suburban or urban administrators. However, the suburban administrators perceived the FCAT to be more accurate than the urban administrators.

Most administrators reported that they used the FCAT scores to meet the academic needs of lower-achieving students (90.2% of rural, 84.6% of suburban, and 68.5% of urban administrators). Similarly, the majority of administrators in all groups (81.0% rural, 75.9% suburban, and 73.2% urban) reported that they encouraged their teachers to spend more time on reading, writing, and math than science and social studies due to the FCAT.

Although we cannot answer the question as to why there were differences between the three groups of administrators, we were encouraged to see that administrators do use the test results to assess students' knowledge and skills. This practice is of specific importance to improving the academic achievement of the lower-performing students. The indications are that administrators are using test scores as one measure of the overall strengths and weaknesses all of the students they serve.

FCATs Effect on Developmentally Appropriate Practices

When asked about the effects the FCAT had on developmentally appropriate practices, there were no significant differences between rural, suburban, and urban administrators (see Table 1). With respect to rural administrators, more than half noted that the FCAT had a positive effect on developmentally appropriate practices, while nearly a third reported that the FCAT had a negative effect (see Table 2).

Table 2.

FCAT Effects on Developmentally Appropriate Practices

	No. of rural administrators who reported that the FCAT had a negative, positive, and no effect on developmentally appropriate practices:		
	negative effect	no effect	positive effect
Reading	35.7%	11.9%	52.3%
Writing	29.2%	7.3%	63.3%
Math	31.7%	17.1%	51.2%

Increasingly, administrators that function as instructional leaders are using a variety of procedures to obtain information about teachers' effectiveness and student performance (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). Assessments can be formal or informal practices to ascertain if teaching and learning are developmentally appropriate in nature. This is in stark contrast to George (2001) who found that Florida's testing program "is deeply flawed and damaging to a developmentally appropriate education" (p. 32). In this respect, the administrators in this study were more optimistic about the effects of testing than administrators and teachers in other studies (Jones & Egley, 2004b).

Removing, Attracting, and Retaining Teachers

The FCAT grade assigned to their respective schools has not had a major overall impact, either positive or negative, on administrators' ability to remove low-performing teachers or attract and retain high-quality teachers (see Table 3). There appears to be a trend, however, that rural administrators perceived themselves to be more negatively affected in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers than suburban or urban administrators. We conducted ANOVAs for each of the three questionnaire items presented in Table 3 and found that the only statistically significant differences between the rural, suburban, and urban administrators were in rural administrators' ability to *attract* high quality teachers, $F(2, 306) = 3.91$, $p = .02$. A post hoc Scheffe test indicated that the rural administrators claimed that they were less able to attract high quality teachers than suburban (but not urban) administrators ($p = .02$).

Table 3.

Percentage of Rural, Suburban, and Urban Administrators Responding to Each of Three Items

How has the FCAT affected your ability to remove low-performing teachers?	Decreased my ability	No effect	Increased my ability
Rural administrators	4.8%	90.5%	4.8%
Suburban administrators	0.7%	96.6%	2.8%
Urban administrators	0.8%	91.9%	7.3%
How has the FCAT grade assigned to your school affected your ability to <u>attract</u> high quality teachers?	Negatively	No change	Positively
Rural administrators	26.2%	69.0%	4.8%
Suburban administrators	9.0%	77.1%	13.9%
Urban administrators	21.1%	61.8%	19.1%
How has the FCAT grade assigned to your school affected your ability to <u>retain</u> high quality teachers?	Negatively	No change	Positively
Rural administrators	19.0%	73.8%	7.1%
Suburban administrators	7.7%	83.1%	9.2%
Urban administrators	16.0%	68.8%	15.2%

How has Florida's testing program affected administrators' ability to remove, attract, and retain teachers? The testing program does little to affect most administrators' ability to remove low-performing teachers: however, the testing has had a greater impact on rural administrators' ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. The fact that rural administrators find it significantly harder to attract high-quality teachers than suburban administrators is an important negative consequence of the testing. These findings are worthy of further research because they may be worse in rapidly growing rural areas on the fringe of suburban and urban communities (Rural Trust, 2003). Furthermore, there may be a need to have more policies and processes to attract and retain good teachers in low-income schools (Ladd & Zelli, 2002).

Job Satisfaction, Motivation, and School Climate

Most administrators in all districts were more than satisfied with their jobs and there were no differences between the districts (see Table 4). In fact, 92.9% of rural administrators reported that they were satisfied or more than satisfied with their jobs. This finding is consistent with Argyris' (1964) research on the principles of organizational design and management. Argyris found that employees inevitably look for ways to respond to frustrations and pressures of the job. Some will withdraw or simply quit while others will stay on the job and look for ways to cope with the pressures in order to do a better job. The bottom line is that the symbiotic relationship between individuals and organizations has evolved due to the changes in the needs and capabilities of both (Bolman & Deal, 1997). It appears that administrators have found ways to cope with the increased pressure and are able to remain satisfied in their jobs.

Rural administrators did, however, report feeling more pressure to improve FCAT scores than urban administrators (see Table 4). Most of the rural administrators (88.1%) reported the highest value on the Likert-format scale (a lot

of pressure), with 9.5% reporting the second highest value, and only one person (2.4%) reporting that they felt "some pressure."

Most rural administrators (83.4%) claimed that the FCATs motivated them positively, whereas 14.3% reported that it had no affect on their motivation, and only one person (2.4%) reported that it had a negative effect.

Rural elementary administrators were more motivated to do a better job to improve FCAT scores than urban administrators. The current focus on effective leadership has come about due to societal pressures of accountability and equity that emphasizes learning for all students. As Barth (1990) noted, principals are not only leaders of instructional leaders but they are also leaders of learners. According to Matthews and Crow (2003), principals have come to understand that there is an urgent and widespread demand to improve student performance and reform schools. The push for this reform has placed additional pressure on schools and those that work in them to deliver in terms of academic performance. This increase in demand and pressure on principals and teachers has brought an unprecedented level of public scrutiny to their jobs. As a result, it is little surprise that administrators in all districts reported feeling a lot of pressure to improve FCAT scores.

Effective and enduring leadership practices are dependent upon motivation. Cognitive explanations of motivation contend that behavior is determined by internal goals, not merely by the external pressures associated with rewards and punishments (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Administrators likely have an internal goal of raising organizational members' level of personal commitment to achieve the goal of improving the FCAT scores. The internal pressure of goal achievement appears to have two cognitive determinants of behavior: values and goals (Locke & Latham, 1995). According to these researchers, challenging goals mobilize energy, lead to higher effort, and increase persistent effort. It appears that the motivation to do a better job because of the FCAT is more prevalent among the rural administrators than the urban administrators. From a rural leadership perspective, the pressure to improve test scores might indicate that smaller schools may be more responsive to goals than the larger schools.

Finally, there were no differences between how administrators in different districts rated the climate of their school. The majority of rural administrators (95.2%) indicated that the climate of their school was somewhat healthy to very healthy. Only 2 administrators (4.8%) claimed that the climate was less than somewhat healthy.

Table 4.

Mean Comparisons by Administrators in Rural, Suburban, and Urban School Districts

Questionnaire item	Rural n = 42 M (SD)	Suburban n = 146 M (SD)	Urban n = 125 M (SD)	F-Value
Job satisfaction				
How satisfied are you with your job?[1]	5.55 (1.57)	5.84 (1.23)	5.51 (1.44)	2.15
How much pressure do you feel to improve FCAT scores each year?[2]	6.83[c] (0.54)	6.54 (0.91)	6.25[a] (1.32)	5.47**
How much do the FCATs motivate you to do a better job?[3]	5.69[c] (1.12)	5.24 (1.02)	5.02[a] (1.17)	5.88**
How would you rate the <u>climate</u> of your school?[4]	5.64 (1.28)	5.86 (1.02)	5.73 (0.88)	1.01

* $p \le .05$; ** $p \le .01$; *** $p \le .001$

[1] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *very dissatisfied*; 4 = *satisfied*; and 7 = *very satisfied*.

[2] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *no pressure*; 4 = *some pressure*; and 7 = *a lot of pressure*.

[3] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *negative effect (I try less hard)*; 4 = *no affect on my motivation*; and 7 = *motivates me a lot (I try harder)*.

[4] Reported on a 7-point Likert-format scale: 1 = *very unhealthy*; 4 = *somewhat healthy*; and 7 = *very healthy*.

Scheffe mean comparisons were used to test all possible pairs. Different superscripts for a particular variable indicate differences between groups at the $p \le .05$ level. Superscript "a" indicates the rural group, "b" indicates the suburban group, and "c" indicates the urban group.

The finding that all elementary administrators (100%) rated their schools' climate as "somewhat healthy" to "very healthy" is quite encouraging. Studies of organizational climate have received considerable attention in the literature as researchers seek to understand the interrelatedness of the multitude of variables that comprise this substantial body of research. Interestingly, Hoy and Miskel's (2001) comprehensive review of organizational climate studies have linked the elements of leadership, motivation, and job satisfaction with climate. We were pleased to find that administrators in our study perceived their school climate as "healthy" despite many of the elementary administrators' responses that indicated that the FCAT had several negative effects on their schools and leadership abilities. We were pleased, as well, to find that the collective impact of the FCATs, based on the perceptions of administrators, has yet to harm the overall school climates in the schools.

Summary

In this section, we briefly summarize the results presented in this paper.

Instructional Leadership

- Rural elementary administrators are spending a similar amount of time each day on instructional leadership as their suburban and urban counterparts. However, reports of time spent on instructional leadership varied greatly.
- Rural administrators found the FCAT to have a more positive influence on their ability to improve teacher effectiveness than suburban and urban administrators.
- Rural administrators and suburban administrators found the FCAT results more useful than urban administrators in helping them assess teacher's strengths and weaknesses across the subject areas of reading, writing, and math.

Assessing Students' Knowledge and Skills

- Administrators found the FCAT to be somewhat accurate in assessing students' knowledge and skills.
- Most administrators reported using the FCAT scores to meet the academic needs of lower-achieving students.
- The majority of administrators reported they encouraged their teachers to spend more time on reading, writing, and math than science and social studies due to the FCAT.

FCATs Effect on Developmentally Appropriate Practices

- More than half of the rural administrators noted that the FCAT had a positive effect on developmentally appropriate practices, a third reported that the FCAT had a negative effect, and a tenth reported that the FCAT had no effect.

Removing, Attracting, and Retaining Teachers

- The FCAT grade assigned to their respective schools has not had a major overall impact, either positive or negative, on administrators' ability to remove low-performing teachers or attract and retain high-quality teachers.
- Rural administrators perceived themselves to be more negatively effected in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers than suburban or urban administrators.

Job Satisfaction, Motivation, and School Climate

- Most administrators were more than satisfied with their job and there were no differences between the different sized districts.
- Most of the rural administrators reported feeling a lot of pressure due to the FCATs.
- Rural administrators reported feeling more pressure to improve FCAT scores than urban administrators.
- Most administrators claimed that the FCATs motivated them to do a better job.
- Rural elementary administrators were more motivated to do a better job to improve FCAT scores than urban administrators.
- The majority of administrators indicated that the climate of their school was somewhat healthy to very healthy.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has several limitations. First, the results of this study were limited only to the perceptions of elementary administrators in the state of Florida gathered through anonymous surveys. Second, the results of this study represent the perspectives of a sample of administrators at the elementary level. The perceptions of this sample may vary from the non-respondent elementary administrators, from others within the state, and from other states. Further, we did not survey middle and high school administrators; therefore, the results may not be representative of administrators at these higher levels.

Implications

More information is needed about how and what administrators are doing as instructional leaders in our schools. Administrators reported spending less than 50% of their average day on instructional leadership. According to Elmore (2000), not only must school administrators perform "the ritualistic task of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system," today's instructional leaders must be able to coach, teach, and develop the teachers in their schools. Across the nation educators and policymakers are searching for ways to improve school performance, and must address a broad array of challenges. Among these challenges includes a need to refocus the administrator's role around the primary goal of being or becoming an instructional leader.

Because the testing program has had little effect on administrators' ability to remove low-performing teachers, continuous dialogue about teaching and learning and the role of the teacher in this process must occur to purge our schools of ineffective teachers (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Open and honest communication, where researchers have time to talk to those that are closest to the problem, may uncover some areas where deeper inquiry may be effective at improving instruction.

Because more than a quarter of the rural elementary administrators indicated that the grade assigned to their school negatively affected their ability to attract high quality teachers, further investigation is needed to determine what

can be done to help attract and retain teachers in lower-performing schools. When legislators think about policy innovations to foster rural development, they would be wise to focus on market-based incentives and investment in people. We contend that if these strategies are addressed, it may go a long way in attracting and retaining high quality teachers to work in rural schools.

Conclusion

The results of this study will hopefully enhance the visibility of educational research of rural schools. It is our hope that these finding will at least inform policymakers, to create policy in such a way that professionals can articulate the policy into practice in the rural communities and schools. Themes that emerged from this research reflect the current perceptions of Florida elementary administrators regarding the effects of high-stakes testing. The themes and sub-themes provide a vast number of opportunities for rural researchers across the nation to share, inform, and comment upon rural issues that are often ignored or given very little attention. Such an invitation relates directly to an examination of the political and educational context of rural research efforts. The findings can be used to guide conversations and inform educational decision-making and practices within government, educational, and public organizations.

If we are truly serious about making profound changes in student achievement, then our national and state efforts need a wider focus. The ability to communicate with and provide support to rural communities, commensurate to their specific needs, is the window of opportunity that politicians and policymakers need to consider. Failing to consider these variables for rural schools may adversely impact rural communities to the point that they will suffer great and lasting harm.

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