

**Matters of Perception:
Understanding and Defining Large District Support for
Comprehensive High School Principals**

**by
Deborah Gonzalez**

Executive Summary

Introduction

Most state education reform efforts have seen sustainable gains at the elementary level but not at the secondary level. With increasing demands for educational accountability, district leaders and policy makers are increasing their efforts to understand how this trend can be changed. Questions of school structures (size, instructional configurations, scheduling, etc.) and school leadership characteristics (professional learning communities, strategic planning, distributive leadership, etc.) are common in the discourse of the day. As a result of this scrutiny, many are calling for secondary school principals to be conversant in the language and habits of change agent and instructional leader, even though the principals on staff were most likely hired for their managerial skills in overseeing budgets, managing human resources, and attending to the general maintenance and operations of the facilities. Understanding how large district systems can develop the individual ability of their secondary school principals to improve learning conditions for all children in large, comprehensive schools is a challenge district leaders and policy makers are striving to meet. This study aimed to describe how one large district has worked to improve the abilities of its comprehensive high school principals to act as instructional leaders.

The large numbers of principals in a large district system seems to call for districts to choose an “economy of scale” approach providing generalized training for all principals specific to district goals and objectives. This generalized approach saves district resources in communicating expectations, but the approach may fail to meet the

individual needs of the district's principals to successfully manage within the contexts of their schools to ensure high levels of learning for all children.

The issues of support for comprehensive high school principals working in large district systems are multi-layered. This inquiry broadly defined support as those systems or structures embedded in the district culture that assist the principal in his/her role, giving them reason to feel the challenges of his/her role are not insurmountable, and that he/she is not alone in his/her efforts to overcome these. Each issue is interrelated and bound by contexts of the school, the district, and the community. One way to frame these issues to understand the interrelationships impacting the district's ability to support the comprehensive high school principal, is to consider what is really expected of principals and how existing structures assist them in meeting those expectations.

This inquiry examined five comprehensive high school principals in an urban district and the supports provided these principals by their district. Using a mixed methodology approach, the project sought to understand the characteristics and needs of these principals to act as instructional leaders and to determine whether the needs vary based on school and community contexts. Finally, the project explored how the supports the district provided to principals matched the needs identified by the principals in their roles as leaders of a comprehensive school.

Critical Concepts & Informing Literature

In a report from the National Association of State Boards of Education, nearly half of all districts responded they had had difficulty finding qualified candidates to fill principal positions (NASBE, 1999). Another study conducted by the Center for Reinventing Public Education reported shortages of candidates to fill principal positions were related more to definitions of who was qualified than to the actual number of educators holding administrative credentials (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003).

Recent reports commissioned by RAND and the Wallace Foundation, documenting the current pool of principals and their career pathways into and within the principalship, further substantiated this finding (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2003; Mitgang, 2003). Each report supported findings showing there are several qualified candidates available, but as Gates et al. showed numbers of potential principal candidates who have successfully completed certificate programs and hold a valid principal certificate often choose different career paths in education. The reports indicated this could be due in some part to hiring policies and practices that make it difficult to find the types of principals most desired for schools with complex issues (Gates et al., 2003). In their studies on the principalship, Roza et al. (2003) Farkas, Johnson, Duffet, Foleno, and Foley (2001) and Farkas, Johnson, and Duffet (2003) reported the qualities once required for principals has changed, and superintendents now expect principals to demonstrate a range of skills that encompass management and facilitation of budget processes, human resources, public relations, and strategic change. Highly skilled principals equipped to understand and manage change, work with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and communicate passionately and articulately are assets to a district. Each of these reports indicated diminishing numbers of such uniquely qualified applicants for principal positions are more pronounced at the secondary level, and that these differences are often school or district specific. The reports also suggest that high schools with greater than average concentrations of culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and high poverty are often deemed least preferred by potential applicants (NASBE, 1999; Farkas et al., 2001; Mitgang, 2003). These findings indicated issues of quality and quantity are a greater consideration for large districts with comprehensive schools in urban centers than for districts with lower poverty rates, smaller school sizes, and fewer culturally and linguistically diverse concentrations of students.

Given the need to attract high quality instructional leaders to large, comprehensive high schools and the declining numbers of uniquely qualified applicants actually seeking these posts means district leaders are often faced with the challenge of designing programs to train and develop the principals they currently have on staff to better meet the complex demands of instructional leadership, and specifically to provide leadership in urban settings (Gates et al., 2003; Mitgang, 2003). While many of the principals leading large comprehensive schools have advanced degrees and hold valid state principal certification, these programs do not necessarily focus on the specific challenges of large, comprehensive high schools with large numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students. The behaviors necessary to successfully lead in such settings are not readily taught through textbooks or through one or two year principal certification programs. School and district leaders often reported the existing principal credentialing programs do not prepare school leaders for the real demands of their roles (Johnson, 2004; Mazzeo, 2003; NASBE, 1999; 2001; Reeves, 2004; Roza et al., 2003; Sparks & Hirsh, 2002). Given this reality and the knowledge that building leadership is a leading determinant in student achievement, the task of supporting leaders in the development of the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully lead in such settings then becomes a fundamental responsibility of the district (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Fullan, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Miller, 2003; Smylie, Wenzel, & Fendt, 2003; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

The current research literature varies regarding the type and number of critical functions of principal leadership, but there is a general consensus that principal leadership matters, and the role of the principal has become increasingly complex for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons included the fact that secondary school leaders must possess the ability to communicate with and to a variety of stakeholders on complex topics, to manage change so students benefit first, to delegate and oversee

management of building, fiscal, and human resources, and to assure high quality learning for all children (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2003; Gates et al., 2003; Johnson, 2004; Mitgang, 2003; NASBE, 1999; NASSP, 2004; Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003; Roza et al., 2003). These leadership behaviors can be grouped into cultural, attending to the school culture or climate, managerial, managing building, fiscal, and human resources, and instructional tasks, assuring quality learning for each student.

District actions can create positive conditions for high school principals by removing barriers that impede the efforts of school level leaders to meet the challenging demands of leading comprehensive high schools. To remove such barriers, district policies may need to consider the value of flexibility while requiring a district framework of equitable learning at high levels for all children. How schools work to reach that goal will be based on their identified needs, the available resources to address those needs, and the school leader's ability to bring all the pieces together to create a cohesive plan of growth. In the effort to provide a flexible system of support, districts may also consider how to create a responsive system based on strong sources of evidence to determine need, strengths, and progress toward increased levels of learning. This would include consideration of how to maximize the available resources to bring economies of scale to bear for systems of support. While not every school leader will need the same training and support system, every principal in the district should be a full participant in meeting the specific challenges of their school while carrying out the unifying mission of the district to improve learning for all. By focusing both on the district mission and the individual goals of the building, principals can become a team of learners, sharing their knowledge and expertise with one another, learning from one another as readily as they learn from outside experts. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes they develop in this process should ideally be replicated in their own schools,

where they create the same kind of team- learning approach to finding solutions to their school's challenges.

The relationship between district leaders and school principals in this setting helps build a foundation to better understand and provide support for the individual school focus, student learning needs, and staff and leadership development needs. This interaction also provides ongoing monitoring of achievement goals and provides a continuous feedback loop to help district leaders make decisions based on a multiple sources of evidence.

Principal evaluation and the process of providing feedback that is meaningful for helping principals achieve professional goals is ambiguous and inconsistent (Reeves, 2004). In large, urban districts it likely the superintendent does not directly supervise the school principals, leaving this responsibility to area directors, deputy or assistant superintendents, or in some cases different content directors. Without clear direction for what is expected, district structures repeat the fragmentation of foci (Hill, 2002; Spillane, 2000), possibly providing mixed messages for principals who are learning their craft with limited feedback. As secondary school leaders are expected to change from building manager to instructional leader, the need for feedback and support may be greater. Without a structure in place to help principals understand what is expected and to provide feedback and skills to improve personal qualities or enhance content knowledge, principals feel isolated, left to their own devices to "sink or swim" in their leadership role (Hess, 1999; Johnson, 2004; NASBE, 1999; NASSP, 2004; Portin et al., 2003; Reeves, 2004; Roza et al., 2003; Smylie et al., 2003; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000, 2002; Spillane, 2000; Tongeri & Anderson, 2003). Principal professional development based on identified needs can provide a structure to minimize this sense of isolation, and assist districts in creating professional learning communities of school principals (Elmore, 2000;

Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Johnson, 2004; NASBE, 1999; NASSP, 2004; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000, 2002; Spillane, 2000).

Being clear about what is expected will help district leaders understand what data they need to gather to diagnose school conditions and to find ways to address these differences in a productive way. While a district and school priority may be to improve student learning, one school may have a strong math program with intervention and support programs to increase numbers of students enrolled in higher-level math courses, but in looking at their data, they find certain groups are being overlooked for these programs. This school's focus may need to look at how to assure the programs are available for and being accessed by all children with equal rates of success. Another school may have a demonstrated need to reduce violent acts on the school grounds and the surrounding school community to ensure students are in safe learning environments. Having a clear sense of what matters in determining a school's success may help determine ways in which a district can support the principal's efforts to manage change and ensure high levels of learning for all children. Using school level and community data in this way may mean that rather than expect all principals will be able to constantly adapt and be all things to all people, schools' needs and a principal's strengths can be matched to create the best potential combination for sustainable growth.

District actions that focus support to schools through school leadership do not diminish a focus on student achievement. A focus on the school principal can communicate a district vision of equitable learning conditions for all children and can create a coherent picture of what it means to be a successful learner. Such a focus can assure a level of consistency in providing tools and strategies that school leaders can use to successfully engage their communities and strategically lead staff in their own buildings, and can help establish a framework for each building to determine a learning focus based on the identified needs of their students and families. This focus creates a

multi-pronged approach to addressing system, professional, and student learning by working primarily on leadership development, but in doing so, addresses areas of professional practice standards, and compensation and rewards, student learning standards, accountability systems, and family and community engagement (Knapp, M., Copland, M. & Talbert, J., 2003).

Brief Synopsis of Methodological Approach

A stated purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which the current conditions of the principalship in large, comprehensive high schools are perceived by the principals and the district office staff who support them. A case study approach in a single district allowed for depth of understanding and a more illustrative example of the different perceptions of the challenges of the position. To understand the challenges of leading in large, comprehensive high schools in the Puget Sound region, samples were considered where high schools had more than 1000 students in districts with free and reduced lunch rates and diversity rates above the state average. These criteria identified twenty-three schools in the Puget Sound region. To further narrow the sample, districts with at least four comprehensive high schools and a district level position with specific responsibility to support secondary schools were chosen. A single urban district was then chosen that represented the regional range of school size (between 1100 to 2300 students in grades 9-12), principal experience (from 3 to 33 years of experience), and percentage of comprehensive high schools meeting state and federal adequate yearly progress goals (from zero to fifty percent of high schools in the district). The district selected for study had a range of comprehensive schools with student populations between 1600 and 1900. The range of principal experience is from ten to twenty-five years, and 40 percent of the district's schools met the adequate yearly progress goals. The district had a rate of non-white students reported at 47.2 percent above the average rate in the sample and a higher rate of students receiving free and

reduced lunches estimated at 52 percent. The regional average for free and reduced lunch rates was 31 percent and the populations of non-white students was reported at 44.9 percent.

The urban center selected as a sample had ready access to colleges, universities, and vocational and technical schools. The district community was largely supportive, regularly voting to support educational levies and bonds, and local businesses have formed strong partnerships with the district. Academic progress of students on state standardized assessments continues to lag behind the state average. The estimated cohort graduation rate as determined by the number of entering freshmen who graduate in four years was reported as 69.8 percent. Student achievement scores had shown steady progress at the elementary levels and the middle school levels, but test scores were particularly troubling at the secondary levels. The district had recently been identified by the state as a district in need of improvement and was completing their first stage of state assistance to improve test scores.

To understand the local issues impacting the challenges of the large, urban, comprehensive high school principalship and how these issues impact the principal position, the study began with an analysis of existing data on the principal staffing patterns, characteristics of principals hired and retained, contract structures, and district and school descriptors such as numbers of free and reduced lunches, numbers of non-white students, English Language Learners, and Special Education students. This analysis of existing data helped develop an understanding of the current field of principals in large, urban, comprehensive high schools, but it failed to answer the questions of ways a district can support and develop principals to make their jobs more desirable and assure a greater likelihood of creating equitable learning conditions for all students. This data was gathered through online surveys administered to all comprehensive high school principals in the district and to district office staff working

most closely with the principals. There was a 100 percent return rate on the surveys. Further inquiry included interviews with principals and the district administrators who provide support to the high school principals. These surveys and interviews considered what the comprehensive high school principals report as their greatest challenges, and how the district is able to actively address these challenges.

Analysis of Findings

Differences in perception provide insight into how each party chooses to attend to their responsibilities around the issues of leading in large, comprehensive high schools. For example, both the district office and the high school principals both report supervision is the biggest leadership challenge for principals. District office staff perceives this challenge to be one of providing instructional coaching and mentoring to staff and thus provides support in the form of principal professional development using “walk-throughs” to support high quality instruction. Principals are provided with what the district perceives to be the necessary tools and strategies to perform this instructional supervisory function. Principals however see the challenge as one of formally evaluating large numbers of staff and finding time to work with staff to make changes when their instruction does not meet their standards. Large numbers of staff in a comprehensive high school of nearly two thousand students make the act of conducting “walk-throughs” while maintaining all other responsibilities a scheduling trial. The principals report the district support is good, but it is not perceived to meet the true needs associated with the issue, that of improving student learning. Figure 1 represents a graphic depiction of these differences in perception of leadership challenges as gleaned from individual surveys.

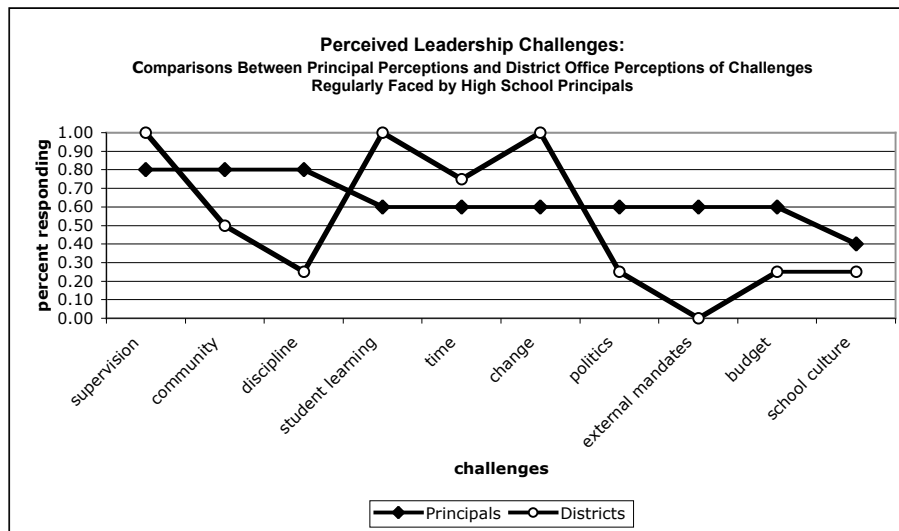


Figure 1: Perceived Leadership Challenges

The differences in perceived challenge are closest to agreement in terms of level of challenges faced by principals in the areas of supervision, time management, and changing school culture. However, as illustrated in the example above, the perceived definitions of what is meant by supervision create a tension between principals and district office who see the offerings designed by district office as good, but not really helpful. The greatest discrepancies in perception of level of leadership challenge occur around discipline and external mandates, in both cases the district underestimates the level of challenge compared to the principals' perceptions.

Discipline was an area repeatedly mentioned in principal interviews as a concern for student and staff safety. Principals explained that on large campuses, there are often areas with minimal adult oversight of student activity. This is an issue the principals feel the district has not made a firm commitment to addressing and one they feel the district needs to respond to more quickly. The principals are frustrated that the issues of discipline as perceived by the district involve consistent implementation of district discipline policies, but not around action to increase security in the buildings. The district office does not view discipline as a great challenge for building principals but in

interviews one district administrator admitted it was a frequent topic raised in the principal meetings. This administrator viewed the challenge as one of finding ways to involve principals in the decision-making process and pointed out that principals who were requesting additional security had made staffing decisions that actually decreased the security the school had previously.

To further illustrate the varying perceptions around discipline, it is interesting to note that though it was not rated a challenge by district office staff and did not come up in other interviews, district office survey responses indicate they believe principals spent a frequent amount of time on discipline. The district has started to work with the assistant principal pool in the secondary systems to provide a deep understanding of the district policies and to teach them the strategies to effectively handle discipline in their buildings in a way that assures consistency across the district. The district sees this as a way to provide more time to principals to act as instructional leaders, since assistant principals will be able to effectively handle discipline within the building, given the proper training.

This example illustrates a difference between consistency of discipline practices as an equity issue and discipline as a safety issue. Both issues are important, but the differences in perception change the form of support and the way support is delivered. Such changes are then reflected in the ways in which the practitioners view the benefit of the support provided. This sort of perceptual discrepancy may be associated with the language used in the district, and in education in general, but it illustrates the difficulty of creating common messages across a large variety of stakeholders who may interpret the language in the messages differently.

The perceptions of district areas of support for principals shown in Figure 2 shows a consistent district focus around supervision but there is a marked discrepancy

between principals and district office staff perceptions of whether support for improving student learning is actually present.

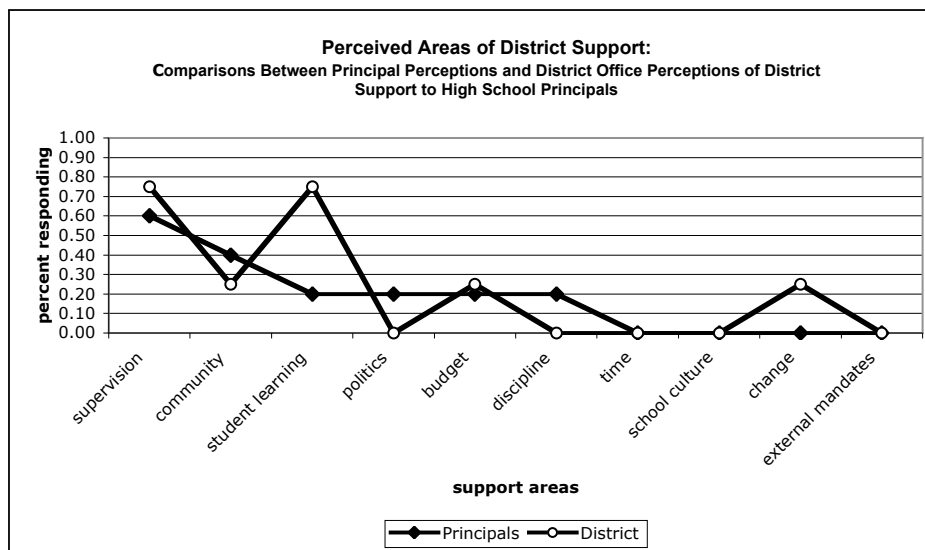


Figure 2: Perceived District Support

The supervision to ensure quality instruction shows agreement in terms of perceived level of support. The district theory of action to emphasize support of powerful instruction is grounded in a belief that this will improve student learning and is reflected in the high level of support district office perceives it offers for improving student learning. The fact this is not perceived by principals to be an area of support could reflect the principals' perceptions of whether this effort will translate to improved student learning. In interviews all principals felt it was a good focus in theory, but many were skeptical about whether the reform would be maintained, whether it was practical to implement, and whether the district was committed to creating the necessary infrastructure to support these actions so it would actually impact student learning.

One of the questions this study seeks to understand is how district supports to principals in large, comprehensive high schools vary based on the unique characteristics of the principals and the school and community setting. This idea of individualization is

not meant to occur at the expense of the district focus, but as a complement to the support clarity of focus provides principals. In fact, the clarity of a district's focus has been shown repeatedly to be an important component to sustaining reform efforts (Martinez & Harvey, 2004; Mazzeo & Berman, 2003; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Sergiovanni, 2000; Spillane, 1996; Thompson, 2003). Yet in being able to provide support to leaders to effectively manage change both individually and as a part of a systemic effort, support needs to look at the unique characteristics of the people involved and the structures that exist to support that effort (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Cohen & March, 1974; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Elmore, 2000; Evans, 1996; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

It is unclear from the surveys and interviews whether principals' estimation of their ability to act as an instructional leader is the result of actual skill and knowledge in this area, whether it is a lack of safety to admit a knowledge or skill deficit, or whether it is conflicting perceptions of what is meant by and expected by instructional leadership. To further complicate matters, this could be a variation of each scenario for each principal. Since the focus on instructional leadership has just begun to be defined and emphasized in the last year, it is too soon to try to make a link between the principal behaviors and improved student performance. While a causal link may not yet be established, the greatest barrier to predicting whether the district emphasis on instructional leadership will result in improved student learning is that the district has not yet defined the principal knowledge and skills that make an effective instructional leader. Additionally, the system does not include a structure to provide ongoing feedback and evaluation to help principals clearly see what is expected in terms of their own behaviors as instructional leaders, but rather defines instructional leadership in terms of improved student learning. This creates a vague understanding for principals, and without clear

benchmarks, neither the district office staff nor the principals can objectively report on the individual nor collective learning needs of the principals.

To understand the individual learner needs, there also has to be a level of safety in admitting what one does not know. In her work understanding collaboration and risk-taking in school settings, Judith Warren Little (1982) developed a series of practices that needed to occur to develop necessary levels of safety and trust. These included analyzing practice and the impact of that practice in terms of evidence of achieving the stated goal. They also included formal training to build shared knowledge and competence, informal networks to support the learning and development of colleagues, and public conversations about learning (Little, 1982, 1999). These public conversations about learning are structured around what is being learned and what is still desired for future learning. This public conversation provides a structure for safety in admitting what is not known as well as an opportunity to understand where individualized learning can extend to support the focus of the system.

The elements of collaboration and risk-taking described by Warren Little do not appear to be in place. In providing a consistent focus, the district has not yet provided the structures of safety to publicly admit a deficit in knowledge or skill, to discuss learning, or to have informal structures to support ongoing development of the collaborative nature of learning. Principals are reluctant to depend too heavily on district office personnel, preferring to find their own solutions, and perhaps fearing an over reliance may indicate a personal deficit in an expected skill area. There was a predominant feeling reported in the interviews that the district expected the principal to have a certain level of independent skill and autonomy to manage change, respond to the community, and effectively manage the building. District office staff perceived principals had a greater challenge understanding how to support quality instruction through supervision, and have placed a heavy emphasis on training for the principals in

this area. Principals on the other hand, report this is not the greatest area of need, yet do not seem to have leverage to ask the district for a different focus for training support. This may be that the culture of asking for support in an area where your peers are believed to already possess competency is not present, or that the district theory of action accurately assumes if principals were better instructional leaders at the high school level more high school students would be successful in traditional measures of achievement. The principals reported they already possess the skills and knowledge needed to effectively meet many of the challenges of the job. District office personnel interviewed expressed a different opinion about the high school principals' skills in promoting a strong instructional focus. While the district has started to employ instructional facilitators at the elementary levels and in some middle schools, they feel the high schools do not yet have the leadership capacity to fully benefit from an instructional facilitator model in the building.

This difference in perception of knowledge and skill may stem in part because an established system to objectively identify what the practices should be or how one would evaluate the effectiveness of the practices to achieve the goals of high quality instruction is lacking. As principals feel the pressure to know and enact certain leadership behaviors, not knowing what is expected and what is still being learned creates a discomfort and often an unwillingness to confess not knowing something. When asked in follow up interviews whether some audiences were safer than others in admitting a lack of understanding, skill, or knowledge, each principal said they felt this was the case, not necessarily for them, but certainly for other principals in their group. Each related they were comfortable calling someone at the district office- an indication of how important the personal relationships with a central office administrator may be in providing support to principals, but also an indication that trust and safety are not present in the group.

The principals interviewed felt specifically supported by the superintendent and individual central office departments. But in the spirit of self-directed learning and individual autonomy, the principals also sought other forms of support from universities, associations, service districts, and one another. The district supports this autonomy, but there was a concern voiced from three of the district office staff interviewed that too much autonomy in this area could potentially cause some principals to pursue actions in conflict with the district focus. A further concern expressed is that some principals do not appear to recognize their own learning needs, and may not seek appropriate support in the absence of honest and accurate self-reflection. This creates a tension between the individual autonomy of the principal and the core focus of the district. The principals interviewed commented on the number of district training opportunities provided that mandated their attendance. The principals did not see this approach as one that took into account the pre-existing skills and knowledge each possessed or the individual building needs. They would prefer to have the option of participating in areas where they feel they have need instead of being forced to participate. Each said the focus was good and saw such a focus as being in the best interest of the district, but individually they did not perceive they needed the type of directed supervision support the district was providing.

Conclusions & Questions for Future Research

This inquiry has led to two important conclusions about the support provided in this large district system, and to several questions for further study. The first finding is related to the importance of relationships in feeling supported within a large system. The second finding relates to the roles perception and definition play in creating professional development programs and in the ways in which their benefit is perceived.

Relationships in this district have created a sense of belonging that extends beyond the school district to the broader community. These relationships are

foundational in creating the commitment principals speak to in supporting learning for all children. These relationships are also instrumental in negating feelings of isolation between principals, and may be the keystone in defining support by the district.

There is also an ethic felt by the principals that communicates a sense of district investment in the success of the principal. Many of the principals (four out of the five) have worked in the district in other capacities prior to becoming a high school principal at one of the large, comprehensive high schools in the district. In that, there is the opportunity to learn the district culture, the ways of being, and the relationships you need to cultivate. For a new administrator coming to the district, it would seem they would immediately be the “odd man out” and potentially be at a disadvantage in this setting. However, the district considers this and whether it is in an act of acculturating a new body or providing the new body with all the tools they will need to survive, the effect is powerful. The new secondary administrators are assigned a mentor principal who has experience in the district, but also with the position of comprehensive high school leader. Even the principals who had worked as assistant principals in the district, or as principals in the middle school programs, were offered a mentor. The principal who came to the district from another district described the orientation process,

“I came to the district, they started putting me into these trainings, and they started giving me in these orientations... These people are really making a commitment to me being successful as a principal. That was really obvious to me.”

Each principal interviewed said they felt comfortable talking to their colleagues or picking up the phone to call someone at the district office for help when they needed it. When asked whether there were some audiences where admitting you did not know something was less safe, each said they did not feel that way personally, but that they had talked with their colleagues and knew they felt that was the case. When probed to

see which audience was not safe, it was the district office in the broad sense of the district office. This sense of the district office is the faceless bureaucracy schools often perceive the central office to be, but the principals felt a strong sense of loyalty to the superintendent and to the people in different departments they have worked with over the years. This loyalty may not translate to intentionality, but is a strong basis for building trust to implement bigger change in the future.

The other important relationship that further supports the principals is the relationship with the community. The efforts the district has made to build a good relationship with the community insulates the principals to some extent and allows them to maintain the building focus with fewer concerns of external groups interfering or derailing the schools' efforts. Strong relationships within the school community are also established through the effort to provide a match between the principals and the schools and communities where they serve. The addition of school staff, students, and community representatives on the interviewing committees creates a process that builds support before the principal assumes the job. The careful nuances of community management by the district are an important structure of support for the building principal.

The variation of support within each of these areas seems to depend on the individual principal's relationship with someone from the district office, the informal networks they create, and the other opportunities they choose to access. The most significant areas of challenge identified by four of the five principals surveyed were around discipline, community engagement, and supervising instruction. The greatest match of district support to principal identified challenge was in the area of supervision of instruction. To support their development needs in other areas, principals report relying on the personal relationships they have with district office staff, with one another, and on the networks they have beyond the district. Principals feel they are buffered by these relationships

from external distractions, and that their communities are generally supportive of the school programs. While most principals reported a feeling of pressure to perform, they do not report feeling pressure to *reform*. The sense of pressure to reform seems to come from an internal need to live up to individual challenges the principals have set for themselves. This varies in degree from principal to principal, but the barrier of existing district and community structures that support the high schools may actually be impeding these principals' efforts to reform.

The structures the district has established create a strong foundation for principal development, although increasing the opportunities for feedback will be an important consideration for sustaining progress and moving forward. In addition to creating more opportunities for feedback, implementing the structures that will support future collaboration and risk-taking will ensure a focus on continuous improvement and individual accountability in terms of student achievement. A proposed theory of action recommends creating a structure for a learning community with individual development through ongoing feedback and support. The current district actions do not currently support these. The learning community that currently exists is in beginning stages and in its formal structure includes only the principals. If the district administration is interested in creating structures that provide time for principals to act as instructional leaders, the assistant principal pool will need to be supported and developed so they can assume more of the leadership responsibilities of the building. Given that time is mandatory for principals and assistant principals to participate in learning communities, it may require concurrent communities run throughout each month with opportunity to connect through technology in between. This may also mean the district needs to consider resource allocation to support the principal and assistant principal's time away from the building. Thinking about ways to ease the administrative load will likely help

more principals shift from being able to talk about instructional leadership to actually spending more of their time engaged in specific actions of instructional leadership.

Professional learning communities not only support the development of the principals as instructional leaders, sharing the challenges of their craft with others who share similar contexts, it can also support opportunities for ongoing feedback and individualized development. Much of the research studying the benefits of developing such communities points to deeper understanding of the challenges and greater flexibility in thinking about the potential solutions to those challenges (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Little, 1982; Stoll et al., 2003; Wenger, 1998). The informal structures created in such settings can develop safety to admit when something is unknown, but can also enhance more formal opportunities to provide individualized support based on evidence of strengths and challenges for the principal (Rosenholtz, 1991). Working to create ongoing structures for specific feedback around instructional leadership will be necessary to support professional learning communities and individual development. Such specific measures provide a foundation for principals to move from use of the language to discussion of the expected actions and the actual impact of these principal behaviors on learning and teaching in their buildings (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

This study did not examine whether the principals' claims of knowledge and skill in supervising instruction were grounded in fact. Further study will need to evaluate whether the principals are actually operating as instructional leaders and what impact their actions are having on increased student learning. Another area that was not studied in this inquiry was the competence of the district office staff and whether the supports they offered in terms of principal development were effective in improving principal knowledge and skills. The competence of the district leaders was never questioned by the principals interviewed, but to support the changes being asked of the building leader, there needs to be a high level of knowledge and skill by the district staff.

Further research should occur to understand the role principal evaluation through formal and informal opportunities informs the professional development the districts provide to support the existing pool of principals and the assistant principals in the district.

Looking more carefully at district perceptions of need matched to district offerings of support is another aspect of this study that would merit future work. Such work may also prove useful in testing how the district office staff's perceptions of principal knowledge and skill influence the district's actions to support the principals. The work of James Spillane in understanding how district theories of learning influenced teacher training would serve as a useful framework for such an inquiry (Spillane, 2002).

A further question for study is the role formal and informal networks play in supporting the individual knowledge and skill of school principals. Does the existence of informal networks increase feelings of safety to admit what you do not know in front of your peers and supervisors, and to the development of learning communities focusing on the various leadership practices of the principalship as well as on the ability to reflexively manage these?

Recognizing the presence of perceptions is an important component of a district's ability to design structures that will support the individual learning needs of its leaders. This implies understanding the perceptions not only of the principals, but also of those who are designing the programs of support to principals. This study shows the inherent flaws in a system where perceptions are the predominant determining factor in understanding what is needed, and by whom. Cohen and March (1974) remind us shared vision is usually developed around necessarily vague language that leads to differences of interpretation. A cohesive system has to find a balance between the flexibility of units within the system to enact the vision in their setting, while ensuring all components meet the same criteria for evidence of progress. The use of such criteria

will help improve the quality of feedback and its ability to provide support and detailed information for continued growth. Comprehensive high schools may be criticized as impersonal bureaucracies, but policymakers and educational leaders must find ways to work within the given system with the available resources to influence learning conditions for students currently residing in these schools. If cultural and instructional leadership are ways to insure the children currently in high schools will have access to better educational environments, more consistent and comprehensive use of criteria to determine what these leadership behaviors involve must be developed.

District actions matter. This case shows how the district created structures that extended beyond the school and district into the community. Understanding this influence and the policy assumptions may help provide multiple strategies to meet the diverse needs of principals leading comprehensive high schools. The leaders we need to manage these reform efforts must be skilled at facilitation, consensus building, and the ability to relate to the personal goals of a broad range of constituents. These leaders must be present throughout the system, developed and supported through evidence of effectiveness at improving conditions for higher rates of student learning. The systems of support should not assume what works for one will work for all, but should instead be tuned to capture the individual needs of leaders.

References

- Bolman, L. G. & Deal, T. G. (1997). *Reframing organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cohen, M. & March, J. (1974). "Leadership in an organized anarchy" in *Leadership and ambiguity*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Deal, T. E. & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elmore, R.F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Boston: The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, R.F. (2003). *Knowing the right thing to do: School improvement and performance-based accountability*. Washington, DC: National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices.
- Evans, R. (1996). *The human side of school change: Reform, resistance, and real-life problems of innovations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Farkas, S., Johnson, J., & Duffet, A. (2003). *Rolling up their sleeves: Superintendents and principals talk about what's needed to fix public schools*. New York: Public Agenda.
- Farkas, S., Johnson, J., Duffet, A., Foleno, T., & Foley, P. (2001). *Trying to stay ahead of the game: Superintendents and principals talk about school leadership*. New York: Public Agenda.
- Fink, E. & Resnick, L.B. (2001). "Developing principals as instructional leaders." *Phi Delta Kappan*, **82**(8), 598-606.
- Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gates, S.M., Ringel, J.S., Santibanez, L., Ross, K.E., & Chung, C.H. (2003). *Who is leading our schools? An overview of school administrators and their careers*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Hallinger, P. & Heck, R. (1998). "Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980-1995." *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, **9**(2), 157-191.
- Hargreaves, A.D. & Fink, D. (2004). "The seven principles of sustainable leadership." *Educational Leadership*, **61**(7), 9-13.
- Hess, F. (1999). *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Hill, P.T. (2002). *Authority and Responsibility: A crucial combination for principals*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- Johnson, J. (2004). "What school leaders want." *Educational Leadership*, **61**(7), 24-27.
- Knapp, M., Copland, M., & Talbert, J., (2003). *Leadership for learning sourcebook: Concepts and examples*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

- Little, J. W. (1982). "Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions for school success." *American Educational Research Journal*, **19**(3).
- Little, J. W. (1999). Organizing schools for teacher learning. In L.S. Darling-Hammond (Ed.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice* (pp. 376-411). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Martinez, M. & Harvey, J. (2004). *From whole school reform to whole system reform*. Washington, DC: National Clearing House for Comprehensive School Reform.
- Mazzeo, C. (2003). *Improving teaching and learning by improving school leadership*. Washington, DC: National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices.
- Mazzeo, C. & Berman, I. (2003). *Reaching new heights: Turning around low-performing schools*. Washington, DC: National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices.
- Miller, K. (2003). *School, teacher, and leadership impacts on student achievement*. Denver, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education & Learning.
- Mitgang, L.D. (2003). *Beyond the pipeline: Getting the principals we need, where we need them most*. New York: Wallace Foundation.
- Murphy, J. & Hallinger, P. (1988). "Characteristics of instructionally effective school districts." *Journal of Educational Research*, **81**(3), 175-181.
- NASBE (1999). *Principals of change: The report of the NASBE study group on school leadership*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of School Boards of Education.
- NASSP (2004). *Supporting principals who break ranks*. Reston, VA: National Association of School Boards of Education.
- Newmann, F.M. & Wehlage, G.G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Portin, B., Schneider, P., DeArmond, M., Gundlach, L. (2003). *Making sense of leading schools: A study of the school principalship*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- Reeves, D.B. (2004). "Evaluating Administrators." *Educational Leadership*, **61**(7), 52-58.
- Resnick, L.B. & Hall, M.W. (1998). "Learning organizations for sustainable education reform." *Daedalus* **127**(4), 89-119.
- Roza, M., Celio, M., Harvey, J., & Wishon, S. (2003). *A matter of definition: Is there truly a shortage of school principals*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- Sergiovanni, T.J. (2000). *The lifeworld of leadership: Creating culture, community, and personal meaning in our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Smylie, M.A., Wenzel, S.A., Fendt, C. Eds. (2003). *The Chicago Annenberg challenge: Leadership lessons from comprehensive school reforms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Sparks, D. & Hirsh, S. (2000). *Learning to lead, leading to learn: Improving school quality through principal professional development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

- Sparks, D. & Hirsh, S. (2002). *Designing powerful professional development for teachers and principals*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
- Spillane, J. P. (1996). School districts matter: Local educational authorities and state instructional policy. *Educational Policy* **10**(1), 63-87.
- Spillane, J.P. (2000). "Cognition and policy implementation: District policymakers and the reform of mathematics education." *Cognition and Instruction*, **18**(2), 141-179.
- Thompson, S. (2003). "Creating a high-performance school system". *Phi Delta Kappan*, **87**(4), 488-485.
- Tonger, W. & Anderson, S. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools*. Alexandria, VA: Learning First Alliance.