Professional Development for School Administrators: A Preliminary Analysis of How People Learn on the Job

Delivered as part of symposium, Bridging Theory and Praxis through Professional Development for School Administrators: A University and School District Collaboration

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“We are trying to navigate with no new maps of the landscape. So we are trying to navigate through those structural and political changes, but there is no map.”

(High School Principal)

Introduction: Public School Leadership of the 21st Century

There has been a large shift in the responsibilities and contexts of educational leaders in the 21st Century. Schools must accommodate the changing school demographics as enrollment in the public education system has more than tripled in the 20th century and will continue to rise through 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2004). Additionally, there has been an increase in the number of single parent households, special education students, and students living in poverty (Murphy, 2002). Principals in the 21st Century have many more responsibilities than the early “principal teachers” in the 20th Century, and their position has become increasingly complex. As a result, the training and professional development needs for the principal have also changed.

Public education demands that educational leaders and public schools be responsible for several different areas other than curriculum and instruction. The roles that educational leaders fill are challenging and administrators need to be prepared to deal with the structural and political forces in public education, such as financial constraints, staffing issues, and accountability demands. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2001) projected that more than 40% of existing public school principals will retire over the next ten years. Increasing job stress, inadequate school funding, and increased responsibilities without adequate incentives have exacerbated this shortage (NASSP, 2001).

There is a need for a systematic method to ensure that there will be well-qualified prospects available to fill the vacancies and that educational leadership skills address the
structural and political forces present in public schools in the 21st Century. Superintendents and principals across the nation report that it is difficult to attract and retain talented leaders for schools and that better designed professional development opportunities need to be developed (Public Agenda, October 2001). The National Staff Development Council (2002) recommended dialogue with principals to understand both the professional development opportunities given to them, and the types of professional development that would be helpful to them.

Sparks, in *A New Vision for Staff Development* (1997), argued that the changes in the education system and the additional responsibilities that educators face called for a new type of staff professional development and argued that principals must see themselves as leaders of learning communities and career-long learners; they must also be “system designers” and “schools designers” who focus on instructional leadership and skills. Researchers found that the most effective professional development is job-embedded and collective (Fullan, 2001; DuFour, 2000). The concept of learner-centered leadership focuses on the learner-leaders; active learning is required and principals must reflect on their knowledge, mistakes, and lessons. The Learner Centered Leadership Program at Arizona State University encouraged/included many of the types of activities that educational leaders find beneficial which are discussed in our findings section.

Literature Review

Metaphors of the Principal

The principalship has been defined according to different methods of leading; in one decade principals were urged to be “bureaucratic executives” and approach leadership from a bureaucracy standpoint, ten years later they were urged to be “humanistic facilitators”, and then
“instructional leaders” (Beck & Murphy, 1993). Principals are required to handle more than ever, and the educational requirements have changed as their roles and responsibilities have changed. Table 1 highlights a few of the change in the role and preparation of the principal throughout the last century. Understanding these changes in enables a better grasp of the educational challenges that principals of the 21st century face. Educational leaders today are required to employ different types of leadership to handle multiple contexts that shape schools, with special attention on the significance of required accountability student testing.

Table 1

The Evolution of the Principal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Responsibilities/View of their Role</th>
<th>Academic Preparation</th>
<th>Leadership Qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Impart the truth</td>
<td>Same as a teacher</td>
<td>Zeal for education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scientific management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values broker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Executives</td>
<td>Same as a teacher</td>
<td>Managerial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Managers of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scientific manager</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Democratic leader on the home-front</td>
<td>Same as a teacher</td>
<td>Promote democratic leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Skilled and professional administrator</td>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>Had to deal with both academic and spheres, i.e., Brown vs. Board of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overseers of minute details.</td>
<td>Doctoral level training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continuous professional training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Bureaucratic executive</td>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>Political demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belief in the “correct” technique</td>
<td>Doctoral level work</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative preparation</td>
<td>Confusion about role expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Competent with modern technology</td>
<td>Look to military for leadership style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belief that principalship is a job that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Professional Development for School Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Academic Preparation</th>
<th>Professional Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Adept at dealing with the external factors exerted on schools</td>
<td>Academic preparation, Doctoral level work, Quantitative preparation, Competent with modern technology, Professional certification</td>
<td>Adept at dealing with the community, Give meaning to educational endeavors, Juggle multiple roles: humanist, so humanistic facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Solve problems, Provide resources</td>
<td>Doctoral level work, Quantitative preparation, Competent with modern technology, Professional certification</td>
<td>Principal as visionary, Change agent, Instructional leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Restructuring movement</td>
<td>Doctoral level work, Quantitative preparation, Competent with modern technology, Professional certification</td>
<td>Prepare teachers to teach state standards, Changing school demographics, Accountability in education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Beck & Murphy (1993)

### The Principal and Distributed Leadership

The principal of the 21st Century is no longer the “captain of the ship”, but rather a team player, exhibiting distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is characterized by a sharing of responsibilities, which is necessary due to the amount of responsibility today’s principals have.

In *Building a New Structure for School Leadership* (2000), Elmore discussed the change in schools in the late twentieth century and the new type of leadership that is required; namely, distributed leadership. In organizations such as schools, “people specialize or develop particular competencies related to their dispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles” (p. 14). No single person can master all roles and the specialize knowledge required.

Distributed leadership is relatively new and the research base is still embryonic. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2001) discuss the various ways that principals distribute leadership through the way they organize their school: the evaluations of teachers are shared so that each assistant principal is responsible for completing a certain number per week, each assistant principal is responsible for supervising their share of after-school programs, working in the
cafeteria, greeting the buses and parents before and after-school, etc. In addition to these general activities, principals are responsible today for data analysis, which is crucial to the performance of their students. Knowledge of student performance, testing requirements, student knowledge, student needs, course scheduling, teachers performance, is all a part of this data analysis. Spillane et al. (2001) suggest that even the best qualified principal is unlikely to have mastery of all and will share responsibility with educational leaders so that each can specialize in an area in which they have strengths.

Federal Accountability: No Child Left Behind

A large part of the accountability movement that schools now have to deal with is the result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal mandate signed by President George W. Bush January 8, 2002. NCLB requires states to establish standards and test students in grades 3-8 on those standards; schools must test 95% of all students, and disaggregate student test score data by student subgroups; there must be an increase in achievement for each subgroup, or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Adequate Yearly Progress is very important to schools, because the state may sanction a school that does not make AYP for 3 or more years and even replace the principal. In that event the principal and five other staff members may be replaced. In Arizona, the state has already advertised for mentor principals who would be assigned to a School Failing to Meet the Academic Standards to mentor/supervise the current principal. Additionally, the state has advertised for Turnaround Principals for a School Failing to Meet the Academic Standards; he/she would replace the current principal and become the educational leader of the school. The state fired principals at five of the state’s 11 “failing” schools on March 22, 2005, and the state expects to replace the principal with a Turnaround Principal, a state-approved
principal from a pool of experienced educators specially trained in turnaround techniques (AZCentral, Mar. 22, 2005).

State Accountability: AZ LEARNS and Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (A.I.M.S.)

A requirement of NCLB is that each state must establish state standards and test its students on these standards. There are three subject areas tested by AIMS: mathematics, reading, and writing. In addition to being administered to students in 3rd, 5th, 8th, & 10th grade students must pass all three portions of the AIMS to graduate from high school beginning in 2006. Six out of ten high school sophomores in Arizona failed the AIMS test in spring 2004, despite school districts’ efforts to improve AIMS test scores (AZCentral, Aug 25, 2004). Additionally, students identified as English Language Learners have a higher failure rate than mainstream students; nine out of ten high-school students in Arizona failed the math and reading portions of the AIMS spring of 2004 (Arizona Daily Star, Sept. 23, 2004).

Federal and state accountability mandates place pressure on schools with high numbers of limited English Proficiency students (LEP); schools are required to disaggregate their test scores for: a) economically disadvantaged students, b) students from major racial and ethnic groups, c) students with disabilities, and d) students with limited English proficiency (LEP) (Abedi, 2004). In this paper, we examined a few of the intended and unintended outcomes federal and state accountability mandates on principals’ leadership styles, and professional development.

Traditional Principal Professional Development

Professional development is a key component for principals to perform their positions. Professional development is the total set of ongoing experiences that an educator seeks to add to his or her knowledge base, increase technical skills, modify attitudes and change behaviors (Daresh, 1992). Historically professional development included four specific activities: 1) Pre-
Professional Development for School Administrators

service, comprised of teaching experience and administrative licensure requirements such as graduate university coursework, initial year guided or mentoring work experience; 2) Staff development/in-service, which includes workshops, seminars, and meetings for the school or district; 3) Induction, first year or initial administrative job experiences, is voluntary or required professional development, and 4) Augmentative professional activities, including memberships and attendance in profession organizations and associations, reading and writing of scholarly materials, professional networking activities, professional reflective practices, scholarly and action research, and graduate level university coursework (Daresh & Playko, 1992). These activities are typical of administrative professional development. In a later section we will contrast this list with what principals and assistant principals in our project said they needed.

Principals and superintendent recently surveyed by Public Agenda (2003) reported that principals’ most valuable preparation for their position was the mentoring and guidance from people they had worked with (fifty-two percent). Only 4% said that graduate school studies (courses) were their most valuable preparation while previous on the job experience was 44%.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentoring/guidance</th>
<th>Graduate school studies</th>
<th>Previous on-the-job experiences</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A large number of principals (sixty-seven percent) felt “typical leadership programs in graduate school of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today’s school district.” (p. 39). Principals have to be decision makers; fifty-two percent pointed to their co-
workers and forty-four percent to on-the job experiences as the most valuable preparation for their positions. Seventy-five percent of principals surveyed by Public Agenda felt that the requirements for certifying administrators should be changed to include substantially more focus on practical, hands-on experience. These results were from a national mail survey completed by 1,006 public school superintendent and 925 principals, and the results were not separated by years of experience in the position.

Our explanation for these results is that graduate work may not have been relevant to the educational landscape of public schools today. While there is a ring of truth to this observation, principals and superintendents also need help learning what is important and what not to learn. Our view is that this data is often used to criticize university coursework instead of suggesting how coursework helps one learn from experience.

Principals and Student Achievement/Student Learning

Principals historically have been viewed as having a large impact on student achievement; ‘instructional leadership” is a key part of the principalship as they “observe in classrooms, participate in staff development, be visible on campus, and make instructional resources available to teachers” (Lambert, Walker., Zimmerman, Copper, Lambert, Gerdner, Slack, Ford, 1995, pg. 14). Under NCLB, schools are responsible for ensuring that all students learn the state standards. There are many new efforts to use data to help teachers inform instruction and make sure that student performance is increasing until 2013-2014 when all students must be “proficient”. Our research on professional development asks how state and federal accountability mandates are shaping the role of the principal and impacting leadership development in schools.
Method

Research Sites

This research was located in a large urban center in the Southwest U.S. The high school district consisted of ten comprehensive and three alternative high schools; five high schools participated in the Learner Centered Leadership grant.

Table 3

*District Demographic Changes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Arizona State Department of Education Website (Feb, 2005)

As demonstrated by the above, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Hispanic students since 1999. All schools had a majority of Hispanic students and 1/5 of the students were English Language Learners. All of the schools involved in this study were Title 1 schools, significantly above the thirty-percent poverty criteria; all the high schools dealt with issues such as a high minority population and language diversity as well as low student achievement on standardized tests among both English and non-English speaking students.

Title 1 schools are identified by the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, and are eligible to receive federal funds to improve education in the schools. Many issues are associated with Title 1 schools, including a high percentage of English Language Learners, lower socioeconomic status, and the number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.
All schools in the High School District receive Title 1 funds. While there are four measures of poverty the statute permits a Local Education Agency (LEA) to use for identifying eligible school attendance areas for Title 1 schools, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch is by far most frequently used. However, high school and middle school students are less likely to take part in free and reduced-price lunch programs than are elementary school students. Therefore, those schools may not be identified as eligible for Title I federal funds and services or, if eligible, may not receive as high an allocation as their actual poverty rate would be given. In order to address the situation, a local education agency (LEA) may use comparable data collected through alternative means such as a survey. Also, an LEA may use the “feeder pattern” concept. This concept allows the LEA to project the number of low-income children in a middle school or high school based on the average poverty rate of the elementary school attendance areas that feed into that school (U.S. Dept of Education, 2003, Title 1 Schools).

There are technical issues associated with the education and testing of limited English Proficient minority students; attention to educating this population has shown the educational inequities have not been resolved. This discussion is especially timely as the LEP student population is growing and concentrated in some states, such as the desert Southwest; nationally the total number of students designated as LEP is 9.6% of enrollment (NCES, 2002), the schools our research was located in had a LEP population of 21% (personal communication, Curriculum Director, October 21, 2004).
Table 4

*Percent LEP and Percent Free and Reduced Lunch (2002 – 2003)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Percent LEP</th>
<th>Percent Free and Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>65.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>50.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>44.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>55.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>43.73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Arizona State Department of Education Website (Feb. 2005)

All schools, especially Title 1 schools receiving federal funds, must report the disaggregated test results for all groups of students. Many researchers (Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Amrein, & Berliner, 2002; McNeil, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Jones, Jones & Hargrove, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) have found that state tests negatively affect the classroom instruction, place certain populations at a disadvantage and disproportionately affect Title 1 schools as their population is generally comprised of high-poverty, ethnic and racial minorities, and disabled students. Amrein & Berliner (2002) discussed that teachers, researchers, and social critics contend that high-stakes testing policies, such as *NCLB*, have negatively affected the quality of education as many teachers teach to the test (p. 11). They also found that there was no compelling evidence that standardized testing, such as AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards) and other state tests, increased student learning or resulted in transfer to broader domains of knowledge and skill.
As demonstrated by this table, the Limited English Proficient rates have substantially increased in recent years, and continue to do so. Any special needs population, such as special education, or Limited English Proficient students present many challenges for schools. Numerous researchers (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; McNeil, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2002; Abedi, 2003) found that students from a low socioeconomic status do not perform as well as students who are Anglo and from a higher socioeconomic status. Amrein & Berliner (2002) found high stakes testing resulted in disproportionate negative effects on the life chances of the poor and minority students (p. 48). Researcher has shown that in nearly every indicator, such as dropout rates, disciplinary rates, graduation rates, college entrance rates, test scores, there are significant disparities between ethnic groups (Applied Research Center, 2003; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003).
Researchers in Massachusetts saw large disparities on the MCAS, the state assessment and the ACLU in Massachusetts issued a public advisory expressing concern that the MCAS discriminated against particular socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Eighty-five percent of Hispanic students failed, while only forty-three % of white students did (Education World, 2000a). Jones, Jones, & Hargrove). Amrein & Berliner (2002) stated that high stakes testing, such as that resulting from NCLB and AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards), resulted in structural and institutional mechanisms that discriminated against all of America’s poor and many minority students and that this is a gross error in policy (p. 48).

There are several requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress:
1) 95% of all students must be tested
2) Each subgroup must make gains on the state assessment
3) Drop-out rate
4) Attendance rate
5) Graduation rate

Figure 2. UHSD Annual Dropout

Source: Arizona State Department of Education Website (Feb. 2005)
While there are many areas related to AYP and NCLB, AIMS and AZLEARNS, this research focused instead on principals and educational administrators who lead at schools containing a high number of English Language Learners.

Research Questions

1) What types of leadership do these principals’ exhibit?

2) Do the federal and state testing mandates lead to/encourage additional professional development for principals?

3) What pressures and challenges are they facing?
   a. How are they responding to these pressures?

4) How do principals learn their jobs, given the accountability environment, the numerous issues of urban schools with multiple groups and high percentages of English Language Learners?

5) In what ways do principals in an accountability environment feel responsible for the test scores of all students?

We were interested in how the district office and principals in PUHSD respond to the accountability pressures of NCLB, AIMS, AZ Learns, AYP labels, and what professional development was deemed most beneficial.

Sources of the Data

In this research, we interviewed principals and assistant principals at each of the five high schools involved with the Learner Centered Leadership grant about their professional development experiences. To understand the various ways federal and state mandates impacted the educational leaders in the Union High School District, we conducted participant observation
and job shadowing, attended professional development trainings from both the state and the school district, and interviewed various personnel at the district office and at schools. We conducted approximately six months of job shadowing principals and district personnel, a focus group with all of the principals at the high schools, a focus group and two interviews regarding mentoring, and interviews with select principals and district personnel after job shadowing.

In addition to these activities, documents from the district were collected to illustrate the large growth in minority students, the growth in Limited English Proficient students, and the overall growth of the district. Due to this growth in the district, four new high schools are currently under construction, and three high schools are being remodeled (personal communication, Construction Manager, March 3, 2005). The new and expanded high schools create a need for more principals and assistant principals. Thus it is very important to understand the professional climate of the district and the various ways that administrators are being prepared for the job challenges.

The high schools involved in the study were those that were involved in the Learner Centered Leadership grant program and participated in professional development through mentoring, workshops, team building, and professional readings. The school administrators in this study included both principals and assistant principals at five urban high schools. In addition to school-level leadership, district administrators were included; the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Curriculum, the Executive Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Curriculum, the Curriculum Director, A District Research Analyst, Curriculum Coordinator, and various Curriculum personnel were interviewed. We observed both principal and assistant principal meetings at the district office.
Data Analysis

We used grounded theory for our research; this methodology was invented by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and helps generate a theory in relation to the data collected. We entered the research sites without any specific theory about professional development for principals; while we had some general information about professional development and educational leadership specific procedures from grounded theory were used to analyze our data. There are several specific procedures that characterize grounded theory methodology:

- Constant comparison method
- Systematic asking of generative and concept-relating questions
- Theoretical sampling
- Systematic coding procedures
- Suggested guidelines for attaining conceptual (not merely descriptive) “density”, variation, and conceptual integration (Denzin & Lincoln, pp. 274-275)

We observed principals and district office personnel for approximately six months (200 hours), observed principal meetings and professional development trainings from the state and district (30 hours), interviewed principals and conducted focus groups (50 hours), and transcribed them (150 hours). We also collected district documents regarding the district demographics. We analyzed the transcripts and initially coded them (open coding) with a “line-by-line” method, proceeding line by line and tried to find meaning in each sentence, latent ideas, derived definitions, and problematic areas for the participants. Ideas were written in the margins and used to write memos at all stages of grounded theory about the interviews, focus groups, etc. After the initial round of coding, we looked for the relations and wrote analytic memos (20 hours), and then looked for emerging themes. We discuss the themes in our findings section.
Findings

There were several themes that emerged from our data. We chose the themes that were most prevalent among the educational leaders and supported by triangulation. These themes occurred in our data, through interviews, focus groups, documents from the district, news and journal articles. Principals feel that the requirements for school leaders have changed. They are relying more on a team approach to their work as principals have many more responsibilities than in the past. The principals in the high school district share responsibility for improving instruction, and committed to spending twenty percent of their time evaluating teachers in classrooms. Our data yielded five major themes related to principals and professional development.

Theme 1: The role of the principal changes daily and the best metaphor for the position is “high school principal”.

One veteran principal had been in a principal position for over twenty-five years spoke of the change in the position of the principal; no longer could the principal be the “father” of the ship, but rather must be a leader, understand instruction, management, and people. When questioned about a metaphor for the principalship, expert principals in our study concluded that there was no metaphor for their position other than “a high school principal”. They felt they were not a CEO, manager, or bureaucrat but rather a high school principal.

One aspiring principal felt that principals were required to be all things at different times: metaphors included manager and team player and the role changed with the latest requirements in education. They felt they “could write down what is required to be a principal, but daily it changes and depends on who walks through the front door.” (personal communication, Principal,
The role of the principal has changed and there were several important themes that emerged from our data, which are discussed below.

The principals felt that their job was always fluid and moving. “Five years from now you won’t be doing what you do today; even five weeks from now” (personal communication, Principal, January 12, 2005). Another veteran principal shared, “The job changes everyday; after 15 years of being a principal I have to be willing to accept the fact that I don’t know everything. One of the most humbling jobs is being a principal, because you never know everything.” The principal also voiced the importance of responding to the culture of the school and community. As each campus was unique, what worked on one campus would not work on another and it was for this reason, among others, that they felt that a mentor on their campus is essential. It was important to know the culture of the school, with the history, the politics, and the community.

Theme 2: The job of the principal requires many long hours.

Our observations and job shadowing illustrated that principals regularly have meetings from seven in the morning until eight or nine in the evening. Principals’ work is varied, and they often do not have more than five minutes to spend on an issue. They are responsible for overseeing safety on their campuses involving both students and teachers, building and grounds maintenance, instructional design, test administration, mandates, community and parent outreach, and much paperwork, both resulting from AIMS and NCLB but also school district requirements. Emails have complicated the lives of principals as they often receive over 100 per day, and the principals in our study told us they often scanned the emails and sent one line replies. Additionally, they receive many phone calls, both from parents and teachers, as well as the community. They must keep up relations with the police, the community, families, and
feeder schools. Additionally, they are responsible for student learning and must meet with teachers and department chairs.

They may start their day with a Principals meeting at 7:30 in the morning and meet until noon, walk the campus on lunch and make sure that order is present, have an after-lunch meeting with their administrative team in order to complete some teacher evaluations, and then be present when the buses pick students up after-school. While their position is a 12-month position, and they receive 4 weeks of vacation, it is rare that they are able to take it as new teachers have to be trained in the summer, and district employees should attend district professional development in the summer. They often are not informed of these trainings and responsibilities until the week before or even the same day.

Several times during the research we were unable to meet with various personnel because of emergency meetings, both at the district level and the State Department of Education. Principals were frequently interrupted by phone calls, due process hearings, and neighborhood safety issues.

Spend the day in an urban high school and you may spend your time in crisis meetings about a racial incident, listening to phone calls to the police and running around the school trying to catch the gangs so that a fight doesn’t break out. You can scan the newspaper on any given week and information about AIMS, the state’s version testing to state standards for NCLB, a federal mandate, of a high stakes test that students must pass to graduate from high school is reported. Students in x district “approached the standards”, students in y district “exceeded the standards,” and the graduation requirement to pass is school year 2004-2005 and rapidly approaching. ¹

¹ {Melendez, 2004}
Think of the national headlines, Rod Paige, secretary of education in the Bush Administration, called the “teachers union” a terrorist organization (Arizona Republic, April 2004). Other national headlines about education involve the number of states who are considering not participating in the requirements for NCLB, thereby refusing the small percent of federal money they receive because of the inequalities in their schools, school funding, and in some states, the high number of English Language learners.  

School districts in states around the nation are crying out because they cannot find qualified administrators; instead are trying to recruit and train them to assume responsibility in the “helm” of a school. In addition to the shortage of qualified personnel, there will be many retirements of the qualified principals and superintendents. How do you recruit for positions where the hours are long, the pay barely adequate for the hours and stress, and the constraints placed on them weighty?

Theme 3: Principals feel they must deal with mandates without a plan

The principals in Union High School District felt that they were accountable for mandates there were not planned. One principal expressed that “the educational landscape has changed, and we are trying to navigate with no new maps of the landscape.” (Principal, Union High School District). The mandates referred to both federal policy (No Child Left Behind) as well as state policy (AZLEARN/AIMS).

One principal discussed how the “game had changed”: high stakes testing was now the name of the game, designed to hold principals accountable for student learning. He discussed the new issues that the schools must deal with, such as the diversity of their student system, the

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2 {AZ Republic, Terrorist Organization, 2004}
challenges on schools and pressures on the family, the accountability challenges, and the consequences from the mandates. He felt that the principal’s role no longer existed out of formal authority, but now principals must be leaders who understand management, people, politics, and community and could “steer the ship” (personal communication, Principal, January 23, 2005). The principal felt that part of the change in the role of the principal was due to the mandates that the school must accommodate; they learned of the mandates and changes to them as they occurred. We discuss the two mandates principals voiced concern regarding.

The first mandate that principals voiced concern over was from No Child Left Behind. When principals were questioned about the mandates they were being held accountable for, the first one mentioned was a requirement of NCLB: “highly qualified teachers”. Accompanying the mandates was an increase in the amount of paperwork principals were responsible for. For example, teacher qualifications must be checked and documented in a report. If the teacher did not have the required paperwork, then the principal must calculate whether or not the teacher has met the requirement. If the teacher was not highly qualified, a letter stating as such must be sent to all students’ homes. According to the United States Department of Education (2002), a “highly qualified” teacher:

1) had full state certification or licensure,

2) holds at least a bachelors degree, and

3) has demonstrated by passing a rigorous State test, subject knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and other areas of basic skills, or completed a graduate degree, coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major, or advanced certification and credentialing.
A female principal was particularly surprised to see the ongoing additions to the requirements of No Child Left Behind. She gave the example of their special education teachers being “highly qualified” and the need for dual certified teachers in areas with shortages already; of issue was that there was a timeline that must be met, they had to be “highly qualified”. All classified staff must meet the timeline as well and have an Associate of Arts degree by January 2006.

Not only were more responsibilities placed on the principals, but they felt also that they were receiving contradictory information about requirements and programs. One principal was told teachers must have a master’s degree in the area they teach, as well as the appropriate certifications; however, there were teachers who were on emergency certification who did not meet these new requirements. The principal stated that she needed to have a teacher in every class when school started in the fall, and were often forced to hire ‘emergency certification’ teachers. The reality of having a teacher in every classroom contradicted the mandate of “highly qualified” teachers, in shortage areas like special education and bilingual education.

Another example of contradictory information regards the professional development training. The state Department of Education offers professional development training for teachers and administrators, but holds it during the school day. The principals felt that they could not be away from their campuses as they were trying to help students pass the state test and encouraging all staff to be in school as much as possible. The principals wondered why it wasn’t offered on weekends so that they could be on-campus during the school week. Another principal felt that when the message was clear, the state Department of Education did not have the infrastructure necessary to accommodate the mandate. As an example of this, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction discussed the availability of tutoring money to school
districts ($10,000,000), though there was no plan for receiving the money. The state Department of Education did not have the instructions for applying for and receiving the money posted on their website when the press was notified about the tutoring money. One principal received the application before anyone else because a former student worked for the State Department of Education and had sent it immediately to the principal. He concluded, “They didn’t even have a plan, they didn’t know how they were going to put it out and wasn’t listed on the website” (personal communication, Principal, January 12, 2005). Arizona has a new principal professional development program (Arizona LEADS 3). The state director, however, has not been hired yet, and there is no training beyond the concept (March 13, 2005).

Theme 4: Principals must adopt a team approach to be successful

The Professional Development District Training we observed illustrated the concept of team approaches to student success. The District Superintendent emphasized that every school had to work as a team, set goals, and have timelines. He wanted schools to created a positive environment and celebrate success in all members of the team. He urged all of the principals to surround themselves with the best people and to spend time with them every week. He used the term “Coaching the Superstars” to discuss the role each person played on the team and ways principals could encourage members of their team to be their best. First, involve them by delegating responsibilities; second, make sure that you properly train them; third, stretch them and give them opportunities to accomplish things that go above their normal expectations; fourth, celebrate their successes by letting them know how proud you are of them, and find reasons in the schools to celebrate the success of teachers and students (personal communication, District Superintendent, July 15, 2004).
The principals in the focus group discussed the importance of having a balanced team. As people have knowledge and specialties in different areas the team must be balanced. As one principal stated, “I like to surround myself with people of different strengths than me. I like to have different perspectives on problems. I am not good at everything” (Principal, July 8, 2004). In addition to the makeup of the team, there must be administrators who know the history of the district and the culture of the school.

The principals shared the goal of having students graduate. They held meetings to strategize about the course sequences and discuss who would have the responsibility of various curriculum areas in order to improve instruction. “We focus on the actual problems of getting kids to graduate” (Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Curriculum, November 24, 2005). As everyone in the district had student graduation as a goal, the administrators are currently forming an “Administrators Association” so that administrators would have more of a presence and could share information and professional development opportunities. The District principals felt that the Association was a way to “learn how to help each other and improve communication and foster the community of professionals” (Principal, November 24, 2005). Goals and activities of the group included fostering more professional development activities, organizing an Academic Fitness Center for study groups for administrators around current topics in education and issues pertinent to student achievement, staff development, and accountability mandates. The district was in the process of organizing as a professional learning community of principals and other district administrators.

Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) describe a professional learning community as one in which the entire school community organizes around goals to improve instruction and involve families and the community in student learning. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998)
the role of the principal in professional learning communities is not about dictating or being a charismatic leader, but rather about collaboration and empowering all involved in the learning community, a type of “distributed leadership” where several are involved (p. 184). Our research illustrated that Union High School District is talking about becoming a professional learning community. Participation in the LCL grant activities provides one such opportunity for reading and reflecting on practice.

Theme 5: Principals and assistant principals in the school need to understand student achievement and other data

The Assistant Superintendent of Instruction talked about the evolving role of the principal, as he was a principal for many years. In the 1980’s and 1990’s he viewed the principal as a charismatic leader but today the principal must have a deep understanding of student learning and academic engagement and achievement. Principals must understand the requirements of No Child Left Behind and requirements in AZ LEARNS particularly related to labeling of schools. One expert principal used the analogy of using data to steer the ship; first, one must understand the data and where it comes from; second, must know how to analyze it; and third, how the data directs the course of instruction and fourth, how to bring about change. Principals must know how to implement programs that directly affect student learning and build capacity within the school using department chairs and other informational leaders to impact the entire staff. “…It’s just an extremely complex job; you really have to be directed in order to know what is taking place and to be really effective today, especially in a large urban high school” (September 22, 2004).

We observed an Assistant Principals for Instruction (API) meeting to learn the ways that leadership is distributed and how they share the responsibilities for student learning and success.
They discussed the instructional roles of department chairs and various ways to promote professional learning communities; they also strategized about the best practices and actions to look for in the classrooms. The Assistant Superintendent of Instruction encouraged them to focus on student success through math and reading skills to improve graduation rates. The school district is restructuring its curriculum and using curriculum mapping to align classes with the most effective ways for student learning and improvement in their test scores.

The school district implemented many test preparation classes for students to improve their test scores, including after-school classes, and summer school remediation classes.

Additionally we interviewed the Director of Curriculum about the issues associated with the large English Language Learner population. As part of NCLB, schools must improve the test scores of all students, and a large English Language Learner population is a concern. When the Curriculum Director started in the district in the 1980’s, there were 250 English Language Learners; there are now over 5,000 in the district. The district is comprised of over 85% minority students and the biggest change is the student population as the forms, compliance issues and rules for this population has changed in the last ten years. The district serves students from all over the world; they have Hispanic students, Vietnamese and Arabic students and many other nationalities. Not only is it a difficult situation for the students as some have only been in the United States for a year or less, but it is a difficult situation for the principals as they are judged according to the test scores of these students. The district offers an English training workshop for all of the principals. As the Curriculum Director stated, “All we can do is keep improving our programs and keep trying to accelerate the acquisition of English” (November 19, 2004). She spoke about the state graduation test pass rate and only 2% of English Language Learners
pass as she felt that the test was not a realistic test for second language learners; the test is only allowed in English and she felt that the test only tested English skills, not math skills.

Theme 6: Principals and district personnel use humor to deal with all of their responsibilities, are very optimistic and committed to the students.

This theme was illustrated by the district professional development training in which the Superintendent emphasized the mission of the district by saying, “We gave hope to these children.” He emphasized that working with the children was a very special privilege because they often do not have families that care about their education. He urged the principals not to see their position as a job but as a mission as the principals have the opportunity to help the students (personal communication, District Superintendent, July 15, 2004).

In addition to interviewing and job shadowing both principals and district personnel, we interviewed the Executive Assistant to the Executive Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. She also referred to the responsibility the district feels for education the students, “it is just the responsibility to educate them no matter what” (personal communications, November 12, 04).

She spoke about the various ways the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction and Curriculum advocated for the students; “…does whatever is necessary to make sure the students pass and graduate and advocates for the principals in order to help the students succeed.” She spoke of the challenges and pressures that the district and individual schools were facing, and the optimistic attitude all staff had, “They are not overwhelmed but work together on the issues”. The principals and district personnel were very optimistic and committed to student success, which was repeated in the interviews and meetings.
The Learner Centered Leadership Project at Arizona State University offered support for the educational leaders in this district in several ways. There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from the university/school district partnerships.

As a result of the grant, Administrators have an increased network of colleagues that they can call on for help. The principals spoke several times in focus groups, interviews, and grant activities of the importance of a network of people they could call for help “on the job”, or as situations arose. The themes tie in with the concept of distributed leadership: no single person can be an expert on everything. The concept of distributed or shared leadership, ties both to our findings and the grant activities as the participants’ spoke of importance and value of having a network to draw from. “The Learner Centered Leadership Project has been very beneficial as I can dialogue with colleagues who share my concerns, have similar research questions, and get feedback from” (Aspiring Principal, February 26, 2005).

In addition to the benefit of having a network of colleagues to call, the principals felt that taking time to talk face to face, reflect, and develop action plans about the issues related to their positions. The LCL grant activities provided regular meetings, where the grant participants met and talked about pertinent issues. “The collaboration is more beneficial than I ever anticipated; it is comforting in a difficult and long, lonely profession” (Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and Curriculum, January 23, 2005)

Another theme that emerged was the importance of principals interacting with the university and current research. The principals spoke of the importance of lifelong learning, and current research in the field. The Learner Centered Leadership grant held a series of summer readings related to issues current in schools, workshops about high stakes testing and
accountability, family-school connections, English Language Learners, community relations, and building relationships with businesses.

Aspects of the Learner Centered Leadership Project that Principals and Aspiring Principals found most beneficial were the workshops related to current issues in education (held once a semester), the summer institutes, the summer reading roundtables, action plans, interaction with mentors, and the collaboration with the universities and other districts.

This has not always been the case. In the past, many principals criticized professional development being impractical, and focused on wrong things (Sparks, 2002). Researchers expressed support for professional development focused on latest research on student learning, and effective educational practices (DuFour & Elmore, 1998; National Staff Development Council, 1997; Sparks, 1997).

Recommended Actions

Given the current mandates, the principals in the district felt that the administrative preparation was inadequate as currently structured. They felt that principals could not spend a semester on campus for an internship, in which they were given special assignments. Prospective principals need to spend a year on the campus and spend time in each of the assistant principal positions so that they truly understand everything the principal is supposed to handle; there needs to be some type of practical training.

The principals in the High School district felt like they were navigating without a map and the rules of the game had changed due to the political mandates. “High stakes testing is now the name of the game, designed to hold principals accountable, and I am not sure that it is always positive, and I am not sure that it improves student learning….if you don’t know how to walk that
political fence, understand the consequences of it and where it came from, you are going to be in deep trouble.” (Principal, September 21, 2004).

The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources was involved in a focus group (January 12, 2005), and she commented that there was no shortage in the number of teachers holding the appropriate administrator certification but that many did not want principal positions as the position had many challenges and required a large amount of time and stress.

Superintendents and principals discussed the need for more field-based trainings and job-embedded professional development as the university courses for their advanced graduate work and certificates did not provide job-embedded learning. “A certificate on the wall won’t help you when you are facing an angry parent” (personal communication, principal, July 22, 2004). A course on culture and learning followed by a workshop on family culture will provide opportunities for understanding why a parent is angry and what responses might calm the situation might be beneficial.
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