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TITLE The Best Leadership Practices of Principals in High Performing and High Poverty Schools in Ohio

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OBJECTIVE The purpose of this study is to examine and compare the leadership practices of urban and rural school principals that work in schools which the Ohio Department of Education has identified as high performing and high poverty.

METHODOLOGY A total of 64 schools fit the criteria for this study. All schools were categorized as high poverty or very high poverty by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). The principal of each school was mailed the Leadership Practices Inventory (Self) and invited to participate. Of the 26 rural school principals asked to participate 19 responded (a 73% return rate). The principals of 38 urban or major urban schools were targeted for the survey. Seventeen of these subjects responded (45% return rate). The composite return rate for all surveys was 56 percent. There were 26 elementary principals that participated, 14 were from urban schools and 12 were from rural schools. Four high school principals (3 rural, 1 urban) participated, and six middle school participants (4 rural, 2 urban) completed the survey. Two principals surveyed had terminal degrees; the remainder had master's level degrees. The mean student enrollment for all schools was 364; the range for this group was 176 to 770. The average experience for all principals was 12 years, with the range

being 1 to 28 years. Fifteen teachers from the top five rural and 15 from the top five urban locations were interviewed.

KEY FINDINGS

A comparison of the LPI mean scores of principals against the Kouzes and Posner norms showed that both the participating rural and urban principals scored themselves higher than the LPI norms in each of the five leadership categories, although the rank order was relatively similar. In addition, no significant differences were found on any of the five leadership practices between principals in the urban and rural environments. The researcher argues: “The similarity in how principals viewed and rated their leadership style and ability implies several things. While appearing to be dramatically different in some demographic categories, these building leaders face many of the same challenges. The physical settings of the buildings differ significantly; the presence of racial and ethnic diversity among the student population differs greatly as well. However, it appears that the socioeconomic status of the buildings plays such a powerful role on leadership that it results in a similarity of styles and abilities. The impact of student SES on the leadership of these principals, then, seems to overshadow the obvious differences in the makeup of these urban and rural schools.”

Regression analysis discovered two significant relationships between the LPI scores of the principals and the demographic variables of their schools. First, the years of administrative experience of the principals had a positive relationship with their LPI scores. The second significant relationship was a negative relationship between lower student-teacher ratios and higher LPI scores.

The author offered a number of “best practices” based upon the interview data with teachers along the lines of the five practices of exemplary leadership:

An examination of the survey data, as well as an analysis of the interviews, suggests that modeling the way is one of the most widely understood leadership characteristics. It is also probably the easiest to perform. Principals at all levels of experience can perform tasks that model the way. They understand that their most powerful teaching tool is to lead by example. It is the fastest path to gaining credibility. The principals in this study maintained a high level of visibility and accessibility. They also maintained a professional appearance and demeanor.

Teachers viewed inspiring a shared vision as the principal’s ability to create building

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unity and singleness of purpose. The number of responses that referenced the use of some sort of building slogan was somewhat surprising. The principals' promotion of a daily slogan, whether it be on the daily announcements, email correspondences with staff members, or newsletters sent home to parents appeared to be an effective way of creating a shared vision. Principals seemed to use this strategy as a rallying cry; an inspirational message. It was as though the slogan became part of the learning community's identity. The slogans proclaimed a building mission and created a sense of belonging in the school. They gave everyone something in common, thereby assisting in the creation of a common vision. Evidently, the building leaders understood the power of daily proclamations of building purpose.

In discussing the existence of a common school vision, teachers also pointed to the principals' solicitation of staff input. This seemed to be a collaborative way to pull the staff together and create a school vision. Thus, the vision was not some sort of top-down mandate. The vision was built, either knowingly or unknowingly, with the input of the staff. There was staff ownership. Teachers commented on how the principal's actively sought input. The leaders did not sit idle, giving consideration to staff input only when approached with it. Rather, the principal requested input on a regular basis.

To find out what principals did to challenge the process, teachers were asked what things principals did to motivate and inspire the staff to ensure that all students learned at high levels. First, interviewees reported that their principal's were open and supportive of new ideas. Teachers explained that the principals were willing to provide support in any form possible to allow them to implement new programs. In fact, the building leaders encouraged teachers to seek innovative strategies to enhance student achievement. This implies a high level of trust between principals and their staffs. The creation of trust between principals and teachers has a positive, spiraling effect. This type of relationship strengthens the bond of the staff in the building, and can only serve to enhance school culture. It helps create a fear free environment that permits risk taking. This atmosphere fosters professional growth and has a positive impact on teacher morale. The second emergent theme was the high level of emphasis building leaders put on professional development. While the principals were open to and supportive of new ideas put forth by the teachers, they themselves actively sought out strategies and programs which might positively impact student learning. These actions can also be considered a form of modeling the way by the principal. Teachers and principals seemed to inspire each other in their searches for new programs directed at student learning. The emphasis on professional development suggests the principals place value on research based initiatives as a means for school improvement.

Enabling Others to Act resulted in the narrowest types of responses. Teachers were asked about their principal's willingness to empower teachers, and their promotion of teamwork and collaboration. The key was embedding of collaborative time for teachers to meet and plan. Clearly, the principals made great efforts to do this. Creative approaches were used, such as using parent volunteers to free up teachers or bringing in substitutes to cover for teachers so they could attend meetings. In other instances, teacher schedules were structured so that common planning time was a daily occurrence. Meeting time was either by academic team or by content area (either within grade levels or among grade levels). In either instance, the principals obviously understood that collaboration and empowerment were very powerful instruments used to accomplish organizational goals. As a means to promote and sustain collaboration, principals referred to groups, classes, and the buildings themselves as teams. This was similar to the way the leaders used building slogans to promote a unified vision. Principals used a variety of ways to promote the team concept. Shirts were purchased, banners were raised, and classrooms were decorated. The building leaders understood the value of a team approach for both students and staff, and it was apparent they were reliant on teacher collaboration to enhance student learning.

The principals in this study subscribe to the idea of shared leadership and empowerment. By placing trust in the staff, the principals thereby gain the trust of the staff. The leaders seem to believe that the organizational goals can not be reached unless some interdependence is developed within the framework of the building. The interdependence results in a trusting environment that is also marked by a sense of personal accountability.

The category of Encourage the Heart prompted nearly as many responses as Modeling the Way. Rewards and recognition clearly played an important role in Schools of Promise. Principals publicly acknowledged the achievements of students through daily announcements, school bulletin boards, and newsletters sent home to parents. School wide awards assemblies were also readily used as a means for recognition. Principals also used tangible rewards to celebrate the successes of students. Many teachers reported that their principal gave out small prizes such as gumballs, milkshakes, pencils, or t-shirts. Other rewards recognized the efforts of entire groups of students. Movie days and pajama days were two examples of principals acknowledging the achievements of groups of students.

A common thread within the student rewards theme was the frequency with which rewards were given. It seemed as though rewards in some form were distributed on almost a daily basis. The teacher responses suggested that rewards programs were a

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systemic part of the schools. Students had an opportunity to earn rewards on a regular basis. Rewards were not limited to academic achievement. Recognition was given to students for good behavior and excellent attendance as well. Students were also rewarded for simply improving grades. Through these types of rewards, the principals were able to extend praise and recognition beyond students that were high achievers. This gave an opportunity for all students to earn recognition. The principals of these Schools of Promise understood the value of celebrating student successes.

While recognition and rewards for teachers was not as prevalent as it was for students, it clearly played an important role in many of the buildings. The recognition of teachers was rarely anything tangible, and it was generally something simple like a hand shake and a “thank you” for a job well done. While the effort was seemingly little on the part of the administrator, the impact was great. Teachers appreciated the acknowledgment they received from their principals. It made them feel important and appeared to be a way to keep teacher morale high. Teacher recognition was both private and public. Principals held appreciation breakfasts and luncheons for their staffs, and they also praised teacher accomplishments in newsletters and on the school intercom. The principals seemed to understand that teacher recognition played an important role in the successes of the buildings as much as student recognition.