



School leadership has been a burgeoning topic in education since the turn of the millennium. There is no shortage of research, articles with best practices, and “how to” books on educational leadership. Unfortunately, the development and selection of school leaders has only recently started to gain the attention of educational stakeholders. Initiatives such as the Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative, which started several years ago, has focused attention on the development of school leaders, while the selection of school leaders is still emerging as a topic of interest.

Numerous educational researchers and experts have long argued for collaboration between universities and school districts to improve how educational leaders are developed and selected. The purpose of this Q and A Dialogue is to connect educational stakeholders with both the practitioner and researcher perspectives on the development and selection of school leadership in order to understand each perspective and develop points of collaboration to improve both.

Dr. David Schuler is the Superintendent of Township High School District 214 near Chicago, Illinois. Township High School District 214 is recognized as a Blue Ribbon High School District by the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Schuler also serves as president of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and represents the practitioner perspective for this Q and A Dialogue.

Dr. Leigh Wallace, Assistant Clinical Professor of Administrative Leadership, also currently serves as the program coordinator for Administrative Leadership and Supervision at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Dr. Wallace’s research interests include the role of the principal and assistant principal; district level leadership structures; and equity, access, and the achievement gap. Dr. Wallace represents the

researcher perspective for this Q and A Dialogue.

Q1: There is sudden interest among educational stakeholders in the preparation and development of school principals. What in your opinion is driving this interest?

DS: I think there are a number of reasons for the interest in the preparation and development of school principals. There has been significant research from Robert Marzano, the Wallace Foundation, and the 2010 research study from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto, among others, that tightly link school leadership to improved student learning and student achievement. The research supports what most of us in the field have known for years: principals really matter when it comes to teaching and learning. I would say it is awesome to see this new focus on principal development. I also think including school and district leadership as priorities in the Race to the Top applications and state waivers highlighted the importance of the role of the principal.

LW: Given the increased pressure on schools and individual teachers to increase student outcomes, reduce the achievement gaps among different groups of students, and prepare students for post-secondary options, it only follows that while teachers are being more carefully “evaluated,” the same will be expected of school building principals. Those who are truly invested in successful schools and developing effective leaders see this as an important opportunity and an area that requires our attention and focus. MOST principals (and assistant principals) will tell you that once they become an administrator—usually after their first or second year on the job—there is little or no support offered to them as it relates to their professional growth. We have found that much of what constitutes principal professional development is really little more than obligatory meetings with mentors

who are mismatched in terms of experience and context, and the meetings do very little to coach and truly support the new principal. As principals are facing even more stringent evaluations themselves, their participation in such activities is rarely meaningful or growth oriented.

So, what's driving the interest? I'd like to believe that it is a sincere belief and understanding that principal leadership matters and it is time for society to invest in principal and leadership development and support. Given the significant need for qualified principals—especially in our urban schools—this focus has the potential to develop leadership capacity and ensure that administrators are prepared to manage the day-to-day operations; guide instructional improvement; and create a culture of trust, academic optimism, and collective efficacy.

Q2: Researchers and scholars have linked the principal with student achievement and school success for decades. Based on your knowledge and expertise, in what ways do you believe principals can improve student achievement and school success within schools?

DS: Principals must become the lead learner of their school. It is really that simple. They must ensure that high quality teaching and learning is occurring in each classroom. The Wallace Foundation has done some really incredible work in this area and their research would suggest, and I would completely agree, that principals need to focus on the following five key responsibilities in their role as the lead learner of their respective school:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards.
- Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision.
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost.

LW: I am first going to give you a very non-academic or professorial response: It really IS a no-brainer that the quality of the building principal is critical to the success of the school. My father, a former school superintendent, would always say, "You show me a successful school, and I'll show you a strong principal. You show me a school that is struggling, and I'll show you a principal that just isn't getting the job done. The principal is EVERYTHING."

Those of us in the field of education have recognized this simple truth from the beginning—as classroom teachers, administrators, scholars, or preparation faculty. I can't help but go back to the 1982 Effective Schools Research work done by Ron Edmonds and Larry Lezotte. Their work highlighted the importance of an effective school leader and how leaders create the culture and climate critical for meaningful teaching and learning to take place—from the focus on instructional leadership, monitoring student progress, maintaining safety, connecting with families, and protecting student time on task . . . I'm sure I left out a few—but, really, this is such a significant body of work and truly worth a second look (or a first one if you haven't explored it yet).

Recent research also supports the assertion that building-level leadership behaviors can make a difference in student achievement. In fact, Karen Seashore-Louis and her colleagues identified three key school leadership behaviors—specifically those of the principal—that indirectly influence student achievement based on their impact on teachers' work: 1) instructional leadership, 2) shared leadership, and 3) trust. Also, as a critical component of principal leadership, we have to maintain our focus on equity and justice for all students when it comes to the systems we create in our schools, the opportunities we offer students, and the subtle, or not so subtle, messages we send to students about who should be—and can be—successful.

Principals need to get out of their offices—spend time in classrooms, in the building, and throughout the community. They have to be visible and know what their teachers need and make it a point to secure those resources for them—whether it is time, professional learning, support, or materials. One of Michael Fullan's new texts, *The Principal*, talks about creating "learning leaders" that combine the role of the effective manager, instructional leader, and transformational leader . . . That is another way to envision the work.

Q3: Despite recent interest in the preparation and development of school principals, principal selection has seldom been investigated by researchers. Subsequently, principal selection methods have not evolved with the importance of the role of the principal. Why do you think the improvement of principal selection has not been given the same attention as the development and preparation of school principals?

DS: That is a great question. I think it has taken awhile for practice to catch up with the research. I think many of the selectors of principals did not fully

comprehend until fairly recently the critical importance of a principal being the building's instructional leader. As a result, selections may have been made based on other priorities. It is interesting that you ask this question, as the Wallace Foundation has created a Principal Pipeline Initiative in which they talk about school leadership often being overlooked as an education improvement strategy even though the research is very clear in that space. According to their work, the principal is the most important factor in determining whether a school can attract and retain high quality teachers. I'm also a huge fan of David Cottrell's book *Monday Morning Leadership*, where he talks about the imperativeness of 'hiring tough, hiring right'. Too often, many people hire based on convenience, comfort, or familiarity. Our students need us to commit to creating a recruitment and selection process that ensures we have the best instructional leader possible in each of our nation's schools.

LW: Let's face it: Principal selection is a highly political endeavor! It's not about the "methods" we use to select the best possible candidate, but whether or not we are WILLING to select the best candidate! I am always amazed at individuals that look great on paper and interview well but are, as I like to say, "a mile wide and an inch deep." How can we find truly exceptional candidates for principalships? Especially given the complex, incredibly stressful, high-stakes nature of the job. I remember the NASSP's "Principal Assessment Center" and believe that similar models can be used as a part of the interview process to determine how a candidate presents themselves over a period of time and a variety of situations. There is also a need for more deliberate succession planning for principalships. While vacancies can't always be anticipated, districts can engage in "shoulder tapping" of their teacher leaders and assistant principals to groom them for the principalship within the district. I would assert that many districts lose highly competent leaders because they don't—or won't—recognize talent. Also promising leaders may become discouraged when leadership is lacking, but continue to be allowed to either maintain the status quo or eventually "move up the chain."

I am also a big believer in finding "fit." We have our students engage in Gallop's "Strength Finder 2.0" instrument to determine their strengths and reflect on the type of team they want to create and be a part of as a leader in order to excel. I always tell them you can't always wait for the "perfect" position to come along, but it would be foolhardy to take a position where a good fit doesn't exist. Finding the right environment and school culture is one way to ensure bet-

ter outcomes for new and experienced leaders. Change agents will certainly feel stymied in a district where the status quo prevails and there is little or no support for innovation.

Q4: Principal selection researchers and selection personnel have both questioned the reliability of selection methods in predicting the success of school principals. What do you think can be done to improve the reliability of principal selection methods?

DS: As mentioned earlier, I think the selection process has to be purposefully and strategically developed to ensure that the process identifies the strongest instructional leader for the building. Communication, general competency, and building relationships are important, but instructional leadership must be the primary determining factor in selecting a school principal. I recently was part of a webinar hosted by AASA and Learning Forward to discuss the new Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards that were released in December 2015 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Having professional standards for those of us who supervise principals is awesome. We need to continue to look for ways to showcase and share those standards to ensure that principal supervisors are using them in the principal selection process as well as in how to best support principals based on research.

LW: I have to concur with Dr. Schuler. Districts have to be deliberate and strategic about the hiring process. I would also assert that they must have a clear district mission and vision focus in place as well. Again, as my father always said, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there" (Actually, I think maybe he borrowed that from the great Lewis Carroll). But, really, it makes sense. If we want principals to be successful, they need to understand what the district expects of them and what the "guiding light" or "compass" is as it relates to the mission and vision.

In addition, it is essential that principals have clear job descriptions aligned with state and national leadership standards. I recently completed a document analysis of 30+ formal, board-approved high school assistant principal job descriptions and found they lacked connection to ANY of the leadership standards (state or national) and were incredibly vague and task oriented. The role was really more about the "other duties as assigned." If principal job descriptions are similar, it is likely that role ambiguity can lead to frustration and a clear lack of direction.

Q5: In what ways can researchers and practitioners collaborate to improve the preparation, selection, and development of school principals?

DS: There must be opportunities for those conducting the research in this space like CCSSO, the Wallace Foundation, AASA, Learning Forward, and others to host avenues for information exchanges and other professional development activities for principal supervisors to share the research and recommendations surrounding the preparation, selection, and development of school principals. I also think there needs to be more writing published in professional journals about this topic. Not every principal supervisor can travel to attend a meeting, but most of us read professional journals, and it would be awesome to see some articles on this topic in our professional journals.

LW: Universities have a great deal to offer districts as it relates to leadership preparation and development, and conversely, university faculty at all levels can learn from practitioners and use these relationships to stay abreast of what is actually happening in the field. Often, the criticism of university programs is the disconnect between what we know and teach and what the practitioners already know and need to learn. As university faculty, we need to be mindful of “bridging the gap” between theory and practice—principals need to understand the WHY and the HOW, but we have to make it relevant to their work. Creating, nurturing, and maintaining partnerships with local districts are promising practices as is developing collaborative action research. Working together, I believe universities and districts can create (fundable) partnerships—we just have to make the time and commitment to do that work together. These might be “pipeline” programs or sustained professional development offerings. The conversation has to occur, but the possibilities are infinite.

Summary

The Q and A Dialogue presented two unique perspectives on the development and selection of school leadership. According to both Dr. Schuler and Dr. Wallace, interest in the development and selection of school leaders is tied to the realization that school leaders affect student outcomes. Numerous researchers over an extensive period of time have linked the principalship to either school success or improved student achievement. The link between school leadership and student achievement has been well established and will continue to be examined.

What can school leaders do to improve student achievement? Dr. Schuler and Dr. Wallace point to

school climate as a factor in improving both teaching and learning. Additionally they also mentioned building leadership capacity in others and engaging in shared leadership practices as other avenues principals can use to improve student academic achievement in schools.

Despite national research in 1983 by Baltzell and Dentler that demonstrated significant selection issues in the United States, principal selection has seldom garnered the attention or concern of educational stakeholders. Dr. Schuler acknowledged that practice has trailed research, but as the principal’s critical role has been realized, selection procedures should be strengthened to ensure the best educational leaders are at the helm of our nation’s schools. Dr. Wallace stressed that selection of the best candidate is mostly a matter of will—selectors must be willing to select the best candidates for the principalship. She also suggested using assessments similar to the NASSP’s Principal Assessment Center, which was in use decades ago, and she also discussed the use of succession planning as strategies to develop high quality school leaders.

Principal selection methods can be strengthened and predictability can be improved when methods focus on educational leadership. Principal selection methods should be “purposely and strategically developed,” and tied to national and state standards, according to Dr. Schuler. Dr. Wallace supported this position and also believed a clear district vision and mission to focus efforts in selecting school principals is necessary.

Collaborations between research and practitioners can occur through multiple avenues. Dr. Wallace suggested partnerships between universities and practitioners could develop and maintain “pipeline programs.” Dr. Schuler suggested researcher-practitioner collaboration could be improved by sharing research through hosting information exchanges sponsored by educational organizations such as the AASA or other school leadership organizations. He also stressed the need for more published research on the selection and development of school leaders.

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