

THE JOB DESIGN OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Policymakers, educators, parents, business leaders, educators and the general public are deeply concerned about the performance of the nation's public schools. Educational issues have become central in national, state, and local policy debates. Policy proposals range from issues related to reform, renewal and accountability to fundamental changes in the institutions and individuals who make decisions about school policy. These issues exist in all states, not just single states or school districts. The result of this focus on public education is that demands on school leaders are enormous and complex.

The school principalship has become one of the most difficult management jobs. It appears that the challenges principals face are too numerous and complex to overcome with just new and better leadership. The design of the job can inhibit or encourage effectiveness, and one of the most significant factors affecting performance effectiveness may be the present design of the principals' position. Fewer and fewer individuals find the job attractive with the result that the number of qualified applicants for administrative positions has declined significantly. Fewer educators are willing to make the commitment and sacrifice that the administrator's job demands.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

During May and June 2008 four small groups of Connecticut Principals were interviewed to determine their opinions about the effects of the present principal job design and their recommendations about how the job design could be changed or restructured. Two groups of urban principals and two groups of suburban principals were interviewed. Secondary school, middle school and elementary school principals were included. While the interview format was open-ended, more specific questions relating to present and recommended job design characteristics were utilized to gain additional information. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts and field notes were analyzed to determine common themes, patterns and insights. These are contained in generalizations designed to summarize the interview information.

Since environmental contexts, organizational culture, and leadership style differ among the interview participants, it should not be concluded that the generalizations reflect the unanimity of opinions expressed.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

The summary that follows contains information gained for the interviews of the four groups of Connecticut principals. No attempt is made to capture each comment by the respondents or to use verbatim quotations from the study participants.

Present Principal Job Design

While most of the interview was open-ended and followed respondent comments the following were guiding questions in the discussions. What are the effects of the print principal job design? What are the unattractive aspects of the job? What are the chief sources of satisfaction about being a principal? How can those factors be maximized?

The following generalizations were drawn from an analysis of the interviews.

Authority and Autonomy

Although expectations for principals are high, they have insufficient authority compare to their responsibilities. They do not control their own agendas but must respond to all those who have some interest in schools: students, parents, public and state officials, other agencies, other administrators, teachers, professional staff, classified staff, and community. Parent interactions with schools have become more intense and complex. Satisfying demands from all groups has become an impossible task. These interactions produce internal and external conflicts that affect the ability to lead. Further, federal, state and local school district reforms establish the priorities for schools. There are too many interventions that fragment direction at the school level. Issues of assessment, accountability, and high stakes testing control the agenda. Principals are held responsible for reaching state standards although they do not control the resources or authority to make the changes necessary to meet those standards. Principals have little autonomy within the environmental and organizational context.

Social, Behavioral, and Safety Issues

The sheer volume of intense social and behavioral issues and regard for safety has caused some principals to spend 60-75% of their time on such matters. Legal matters and mandated procedures have become all consuming. School populations have changed and schools are expected to solve a wide range of social and emotional issues. This means attention directed at problems that are currently pressing which can cause a hectic and unpredictable work flow and in turn means that administrator's ability to initiate is diminished because of the sheer time demand necessary to deal with such matters.

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Time

Principals are overloaded. There is little time and resources to do the job properly or to provide leadership on educational issues or focus on teaching and learning. Issues occur all the time that require attention but have little directly to do with instruction. Paperwork is increasing in scope and redundancy. Innovation comes slowly and takes considerable time and attention. Meetings have proliferated, involve more people, and often do not produce useful results. There is little time for professional conversations.

Structure and Satisfaction

While the principals interviewed expressed satisfaction with the importance of their work, recognize that their performance may affect many other people, and are motivated by the job variety and the work itself; an overall observation is that changing societal conditions and situations have changed the expectations, functions, and context of principal leadership significantly over the years without redesign or adjustment in the job itself. In other words, while conditions have changed are changing at a rapid rate, the structure of the principal role has remained about the same.

Principal Job Redesign

How can the principal job design be changed or restructured? How practical are those strategies?

The following generalizations were drawn from an analysis of the interviews.

Autonomy

Some better balance of centralization and decentralization needs to be achieved. This involves not only federal, state and central, office initiatives but how school leadership, policy direction, and management are conceptualized. Leadership activities outside the school level should be directed more to defining broad overall directions and analyzing results and less to the operational management of educational programs. Decentralized to the school level should be responsibilities for the focus and content of the curriculum, design of the instructional organization that determines the staffing pattern, determination budget and expenditure priorities, and the development of programs to address problems and priorities. At present, there are far too many outside interventions, and too many out of school meetings that are only indirectly related to local school issues. Principals should be able to focus on a few school level priorities and do those well as opposed to responding to an increasing number of responsibilities without changes in organizational structure and staffing.

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Leadership Staffing

The number, variety and intensity of problem and responsibilities at the school level have increased without significant changes in administrative staffing patterns. Principals need much more assistance with general management, as well as specific areas such as special education, social, work, and business management. In some cases the number of assistant principals who might perform such functions has declined and some principals have no assistants. Distributing leadership roles in the organization might lead to coalitions of leaders within schools performing different purposes and serving different functions. Formal leadership roles do not need to be narrowly defined. The most important feature of shifting organizational responsibilities may be how to approach change of this sort rather than implementing a predetermined structure from elsewhere.

Information for Decision Making

School level Management Information Systems need to be improved in terms of access, longitudinal data and correlations that would aid management. The ability to utilize available information to analyze and propose solutions to educational problems is critical. Among the most prominent reasons for the failure of educational reforms is the lack of the ability to adequately diagnose problems, propose correct solutions, and determine results. The lack of

adequate data is a major constraint to improving schools, student achievement, and communicating the results.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Much of what is discussed in this document is shaped by perceptions of the present. The process of change in educational organizations is a long one which requires continuous attention and is at best incremental: it is tried, altered, tried in its altered form, and altered again and so on. Thus, change of this sort concentrates on familiar experience and examines only a limited number of different alternatives that differ from existing practice.

Any real change requires new ways of thinking and perceiving. This is true not only for the role of the school principal but for all of education generally. This does not have to be a process where every major value is weighed, means-ends analysis accomplished, and every relevant factor taken into account. It is not possible, nor important, to anticipate the total range of consequences that accompany major change. It may be that what is required is this type of thinking (and action) regarding education and leadership roles in education. This would be systemic change.

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Short of that process what are a few practical policy suggestions related to the role of school principal can be advanced?

- 1. Provide incentive grants to school, districts to design, implement, and evaluate new models of school leadership.**
- 2. Define guidelines for the adequate and appropriate number of administrators needed at the school level to provide leadership for teaching and learning.**
- 3. Increase administrator authority and autonomy and create performance incentives for school leaders based on a comprehensive and fair accountability process.**
- 4. Provide real incentives for high quality performance.**

Finally it would be useful to analyze structural models in business, public agencies, and private educational organizations for restricting ideas. Policy on this subject in other states also should be examined.

