Challenges Facing School Leadership

As the educational landscape grows more complicated with changing demographics, high-stakes testing, and extensive expectations for schools, quality principals are becoming harder to recruit and retain. The increasing demands on school leaders have fueled a leadership deficit. Nationwide, 22 percent of principals leave the position each year.[1] According to the National Center for Education Statistics 2016-2017 Principals Survey, 75 percent of principals served in their current school for five years or less, with 50 percent having less than five years of experience overall.[2] This turnover has destabilized the principal supply and compromised institutional knowledge.

The specific consequences of principal turnover are many. Financially, the cost for training, recruiting, hiring and onboarding a principal is more than $75,000.[1] School culture and teacher satisfaction are impacted[3] and teachers' decisions to stay in a current position are jeopardized.[4] Trust among teachers and the school community declines.[3] Furthermore, research indicates that the school principal is a critical factor in student achievement, being the second highest school-based influence on student achievement after the classroom teacher.[5] According to meta-analyses, about 25 percent of school-based factors related to student achievement can be attributed to principals' work and 33 percent can be attributed to teachers.[6]

While some turnover results from transfers to other buildings, impoverished communities see a 30 percent turnover rate within one year.[7] Such turnover not only affects school culture and student success, but also erodes the *quality* of principals overall. Opportunities to train novice administrators decline when principals move out, and thwart the retention of those who might mentor aspiring principals. Understanding that principal quality is central to school success, the Wallace Foundation culled the work of principal leadership into three main categories: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization.[6]

Additionally, the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute conducted a study of exemplary principal preparation programs and determined that they share several characteristics including problem-based learning, intentional use of reflection, and complex problem-solving.[8] Similarly, universities have responded to principal quality issue by blending traditional university coursework with fieldwork. In short, the scope of this research has resulted in a four-point framework: (1) a set of effective leadership practices; (2) higher recruitment standards; (3) coursework aligned with field-based experiential learning; and (4) meaningful coaching support for new principals.[9]

Design of the Learning to Lead Program

The **Learning to Lead** program was developed by the Shippensburg University Educational Leadership Program faculty to enhance principal quality and mitigate the challenge of principal turnover in local high-poverty districts while adhering to the four framework elements above. With funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the program reached out to Harrisburg, Steelton-Highspire, Reading and York school districts. Each district reported significant principal turnover rates and insufficient applications from highly qualified principals with the skills necessary to lead urban schools. In essence, there was a need to develop a principal pipeline in these districts who could meet the unique challenges of urban school communities.

Rather than offering a traditional sequence of university courses to train prospective principals, Learning to Lead candidates participated in "residencies" designed to weave academic content into practical experiences in urban schools. Using the University of Missouri's district-university partnership model,[10] courses were co-instructed by faculty, a Leadership Fellow, and a practicing school administrator with experience serving children in poverty.[11] Candidates received direct mentoring from principals in their home district, providing a multi-layered support system and exposure to a variety of leadership strategies. The field-based effort not only developed general leadership skills but also grew candidates' awareness of school culture's role in school success *writ large*. The program maximized collegial exchanges between participating districts and used professional learning communities to accomplish group projects, share experiences, complete academic coursework, and provide for informal dialogue about field experiences.

As Shippensburg faculty and partner districts designed the program, they were informed by a set of competencies defined by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). The competencies underscored the importance of personalized learning environments and community schools. First, to ensure these competencies were met the Learning to Lead program pressed candidates to utilize timely data and system-level thinking to inform the best teaching practices.[12] Second, the NAESP competencies focused Learning to Lead candidates on making schools a center of PK-3 learning for both families and the community. Consequently, family and community outreach practices were foundational to all Learning to Lead coursework. Third, Learning to Lead used professional

learning communities to develop a project that engaged the local school community. The projects infused coursework that informed candidates about best practices in connecting community members to student learning.[13]

Preliminary Results

Currently, the Learning to Lead program is in its final implementation stage with participants completing the program in fall 2018 as fully certified principals. Learning to Lead selected candidates according to their leadership potential, administration skills, and prior experiences with students in poverty. Twenty-three candidates from Harrisburg, York, Steelton-Highspire, and Reading school districts began their training in summer 2017. Forty-three percent of the Learning to Lead candidates were between the ages of 30 and 40 years of age, 91 percent had more than five years of experience teaching in an urban setting and about 74 percent were white. While the Learning to Lead program responded to several priorities as part of its grant, the preliminary results shown here

focus on two key program activities (mentoring frequency and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)) and two outcomes (principal self-efficacy and cultural awareness).

Candidates' feedback has indicated that the professional learning communities were an effective venue for them to share problems of practice and brainstorm potential solutions. Candidates' anecdotal and survey responses about the PLCs were generally positive. Forty-three percent of candidates gave the two highest ratings (on a 6-point scale) in response to the question, "To what extent were the PLCs helpful to you in learning to become a principal?" Echoing this finding, one participant stated, "I love meeting with our PLC, the ideas that we can come up with as a whole are much greater than what one or two of us [could create]."

While PLCs were ongoing, Learning to Lead candidates also met with their mentors. Interaction between candidates and mentors

was frequent throughout the year, although was most robust within the first five months of program (Figure 1).

Candidates made retrospective reports on the number of times they met with their mentor over the past several months for four different types of activities. Since the reference period for this question varied on the October 2017 and June 2018 surveys, the number of days reported by candidates was divided by the number of days in the reference period. Interaction frequency regarding "substantial discussions" differed markedly from the frequency of face-to-face meetings, resource sharing and candidates' reaching out, as it *increased* between October 2017 and June 2018. These results may suggest that face-to-face meetings were less pressing over time, as candidates became familiar with their work. While their knowledge about school leadership grew, candidate-mentor interactions appeared to become more substantial, as opposed to a schedule of routine meetings.

Figure 1: Frequency of Candidate-Mentor Interaction
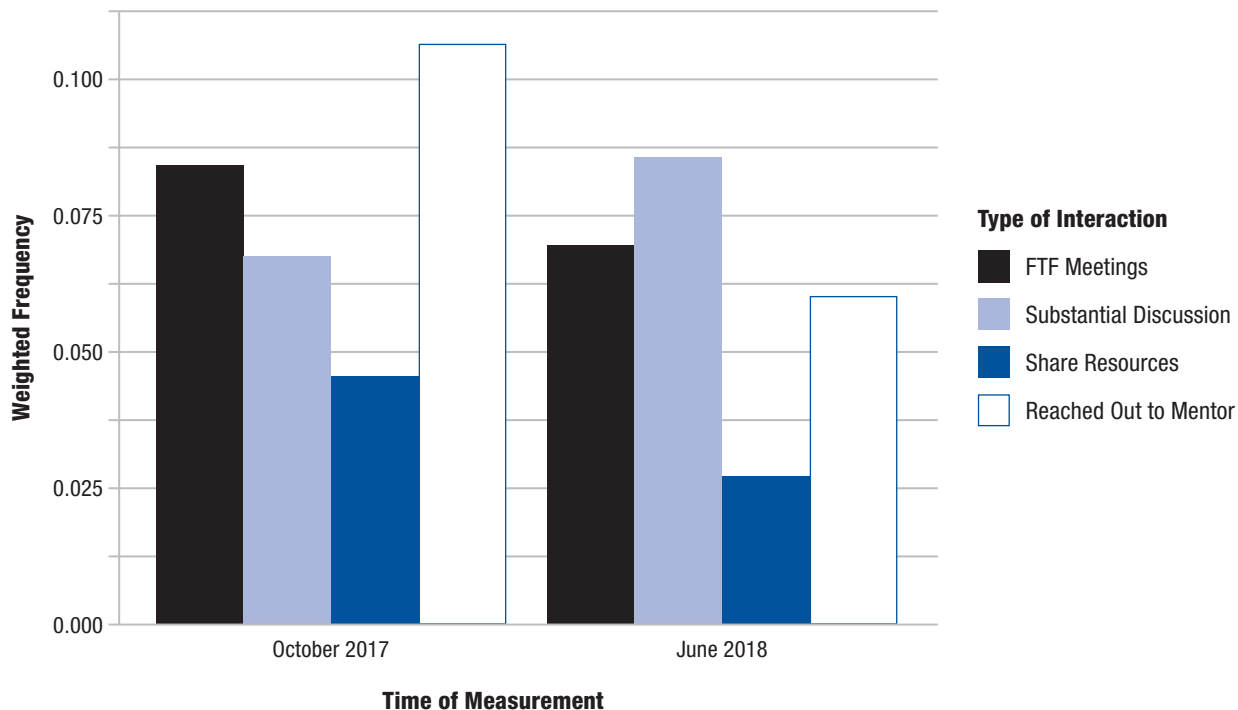
Candidates also completed an 18-item principal self-efficacy scale[14] at multiple time points to gauge their perceived preparedness for the job. Their scores tended to remain the same (and were not significantly different) during the course of the project (not illustrated). Average self-efficacy scores remained at approximately 7.2 of eight points across each survey administration. In contrast, principals' self-reports on Van Dyne's validated 18-item cultural sensitivity scale[15] increased steadily over the course of the project (Figure 2). At baseline, the mean agreement score (which ranges from 1 to 6) was 4.31 and by June 2018 grew significantly to 5.35 (p=0.018). Finally, all candidates successfully completed the Pennsylvania state licensure exam, meeting one of the commonwealth's standards for practicing principals.

Lessons Learned

The sample of formative evaluation data presented above substantiates some of the successes of Learning to Lead. The program also provided at least two general lessons for principal preparation programs.

University, district and community partnerships require effort but they yielded enriched learning. Learning to Lead underscored a need to expand collaboration opportunities for mentors. Future university-district partnerships should purposefully engage mentor principals in the design and delivery of coursework. The program's community engagement strategies grew school-community connections when they led to a community-wide resource fair in York that provided basic resources to local families (like clothing and connections to local service organizations), as well as engaged candidates in aligning academic coursework in direct response to field observations.

Residencies with meaningful leadership experiences can assist principal candidates in applying leadership skills. Responses from principal candidate surveys and reflections gathered during academic coursework indicated an increased cultural awareness while candidates addressed real problems facing children in poverty. Learning to Lead candidates' levels of engagement, problem-solving and systems thinking appeared to increase from the first residency course to the last one. Future preparation programs may benefit from the practices outlined by the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.[8]

Conclusion

The development, recruitment and retention of principals will continue to be an essential element in school success. With increasing demographic and political pressures looming on each school's doorstep, the role of the principal has never been more important. The implementation of innovative university-district partnership programs that seek to authentically weave academic content and field experiences into principal preparation programs may provide a path to both higher principal quality and lower principal turnover.

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Figure 2: Cultural Sensitivity
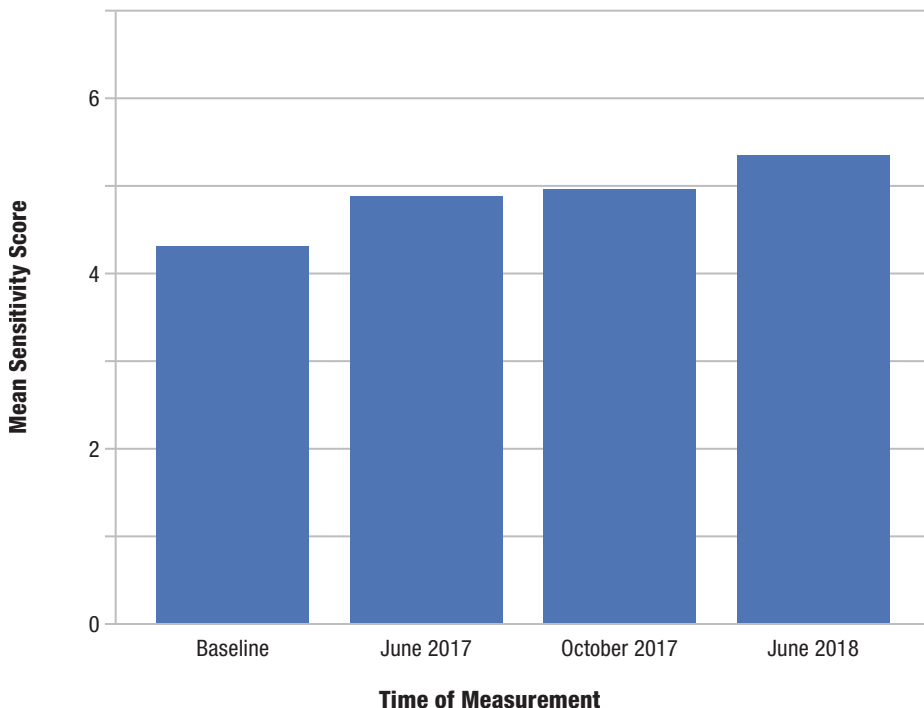
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