

Principals' Dispositions Regarding Their Autonomy in Site-Based School Management

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Abstract

This article addresses school reform in organizational structures. The author presents findings from a survey completed by rural and non-rural principals located in the southeastern part of the United States regarding decentralization of district governance towards an autonomous, centralized school based governance and/or site-based school management. The findings indicate that rural principals favored a positive disposition towards autonomy in a more centralized school-based governance compared to that of non-rural principals.

Much of the research in the first half of the 21st century focuses on effective principals. For instance, The Wallace Foundation (2013) posits that there are five key components of an effective principal. That is, one who “shapes a vision of academic success for all students, creates a climate hospitable to change, cultivates leadership in others, improves instruction, and manages people, data, and processes to foster school improvement” (p. 4). Hull (as cited in Krasnoff, 2015) argues that highly effective principals have several key attributes. These effective principals’ attributes include:

- (1) having more than three years of leadership experience overall;
- (2) having at least three years of leadership experience at that school;
- (3) share leadership responsibilities, rather than delegate paperwork;
- (4) having a clear sense of instructional goals;
- (5) giving ongoing, informal teacher evaluations or classroom visits and give feedback afterwards;
- (6) conducting unannounced, informal teacher evaluations or classroom visits and give feedback afterwards; and
- (7), having school boards and superintendents who exhibit a clear vision of what constitutes a good school and create a framework that gives principals both autonomy and support to reach those goals. (p. 4)

Rice (as cited in National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], n. d.) proclaims that the role of principals is diverse and time consuming. Rice concludes: “The principal’s job is complex and multidimensional, and the effectiveness of principals depends in part on... how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities” (as cited in NASSP, n. d., p.

5). In support of Rice's statement, one such study conducted by Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (as cited in Sergiovanni & Green, 2015) in Miami-Dade County Public Schools found that principals spent 30% of their day in administrative activities such as managing school discipline and fulfilling compliance requirements. Principals spent a fifth of the day in tasks such as managing budgets and hiring personnel (organizational management) and 5% of their day on fundraising activities (external relations). The findings of the study indicated that 6% or more of the day involved instruction-related activities and 7% of their day consisted of conducting classroom visits, evaluating the curriculum, and planning professional development. Indeed, this specific case is only an outline of required daily practices of an educational leader or principal to be effective in schools.

According to Whitmire (2012), three components comprise of an effective principal. An effective principal is one who focuses on "learning and teaching, creating an effective, aligned staff, and school culture" (Whitmire, p. 2). All three elements provide principals with the knowledge and key practices to be effective leaders in schools. More importantly, Whitmire adds that principal preparation, principal development, and autonomy is even more important when "quantifying principal effectiveness" (p. 3). First, Whitmire concedes that building a "cadre of principals to improve student achievement" through an "experiential learning" approach is of the utmost importance for a new wave of principals (p. 4). Research advocates such as Wenger (2009) classify this type of learning as communities of practice or situated cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Only recently have school leader preparation intentionally aligned practice with classroom instruction (higher education leadership programs) through the enactment of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Next, Whitmire insists that networking of principals is of great need, particularly ongoing facilitation with other experienced and tenured principals. Finally, Whitmire concludes that principals should make key decisions in regards to hiring teachers, providing professional development, and budgetary issues (reallocation of funds). The final component proposes a more school based type of governance, rather than the context of district governance (a decentralization approach).

While Whitmire and others (i.e., Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005) support the advocacy for creating effective principals, the second half of the 21st century requires a much *stronger* principal leadership. Whitmire (2012) mentions that while low-performing schools need effective leaders, they require "strong principal leadership" (p. 2). These strong principal leadership characteristics incorporate all of the effective principal leadership qualities mentioned by aforementioned researchers; yet, entails a transformational leadership style endemic specifically to meeting the needs of low-performing schools in both rural and non-rural schools. This type of transformational leadership change involves becoming what Fullan (2014) calls a "leader of learning" (p. 67) and a leader of change. The organizational goal of this innovative transformational leadership style is to hire "great leaders (high individual human capital)" (Fullan, p. 72). In this manner, *great leaders* serve as a dichotomy, pertaining to not only strong teacher leaders, but towards effective and strong school leaders that positively impact student achievement through courageous and innovative goal setting and practices. Additionally, transforming schools involve district authority figures providing principals the autonomy to implement change that best fits their dynamic and unique school environments. According to Plecki, McCleery, and Knapp (2006):

We argue that improving educational governance is essentially a search for appropriate and productive methods of allocating authority and responsibility to act within the

educational system, ultimately to act on behalf of young people. Seen this way, governance is part of the process of improving student learning, and it does so principally by creating the playing field, the central structure(s) that channel the exercise of that authority and responsibility—and ultimately, the exercise of leadership. (p. 8)

Such improvements in educational governance at the school level involve as Sergiovanni and Green (2015) contend, “overcome(ing) the limits of traditional management and leadership... to nonlinear conditions and loose structuring...that can inspire extraordinary commitment and performance” (p. 87). In this way, *a strong principal leader* as Whitmire (2012) exclaims has the ability to clearly articulate the mission and vision of the school to all stakeholders and implement instructional and structural changes in his or her own school. That is, in any organization strong and effective leadership drives the change process (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010). Such change process involves a shift in decentralization of governance from district control to an autonomous, centralized state of school based decision making with a strong leader at the helm.

Strong, transformational principals as leaders in 21st century schools are needed, but is two-fold. Cheney, Davis, Garrett, and Holleran (2010) add another component to an effective and strong principal in that “exemplary principals establish a climate that values effective teaching and ensures that the most promising teachers are selected...” (p. 10). Levine (as cited in Cheney et al.) strongly believes that improvements are needed in the areas of training administrators such as “principals, superintendents and other education leaders” (p. 10). Cheney et al. conclude that efforts are needed in principal preparation programs “to be more systematic and rigorous” (p. 10). To ensure that schools are led by strong, effective, and exemplary principals, “high-quality educational leadership is critically needed for schools across the country” (Cheney et al., p. 10).

Under the educational reform of the Obama administration, a blueprint building upon the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 focused on improving school leader effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2010b). The four goals pertaining directly to effective school leadership include:

- (1) elevating the profession and focus on recruiting, preparing, developing, and rewarding effective leaders;
- (2) focusing on leader effectiveness in improving student outcomes;
- (3) supporting states and districts that are willing to take bold action to increase the number of effective leaders where they are needed most; and,
- (4) strengthening pathways into school leadership positions in high-need schools. (USDE, 2010b, p. 1)

This enactment involves creating strong, effective, and exemplary school leaders who will greatly impact student learning and have an enormous impact upon organizational change.

Current trends in education involve implementing radical, yet dramatic organizational changes that greatly impact and produce rapid and immediate results in student achievement. One such organizational change process involves a shift or decentralization of district governance to an autonomous, centralized school based governance or site-based school management (SBSM). That is, “smaller governing bodies representing a wide cross section of educators and community members can better determine policies that directly affect them” (Sturm & Barcellona, n. d., p. 2) or as Murphy and Beck (as cited in Beck & Murphy, 1998)

posit “moving authority away from districts and states and establishing representative decision-making systems within individual schools” (p. 359). Lunenburg (2010, p. 5) surmises that “decentralization is systemically dispersing the power and decision-making throughout the school district to middle-and lower-level leaders.” Candoli (1995) adds that “when individual schools are charged with the total development of educational programs aimed at serving the needs of children...school personnel will develop more cogent programs because they know the students and their needs” (p. xi). The governing bodies include the principal at helm and site-based decision committees consisting of teachers, parents, the community and other stakeholders. Sturm and Barcellona (n. d.) add that there are four advantages for site-based school management (school governance). Wohsletter (1994), Carlos (1993), and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (1996; as cited in Sturm & Barcellona, n. d.) state that:

SBM (1) fosters within the community a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for the quality of education through the process of making decisions locally; (2) gives more authority and accountability for results to teachers, administrators, parents, and teachers; (3) motivates improved performance due to the flatter management structure focused on measurable academic achievement; and (4) provides for more efficient use of resources. (p. 3)

Opponents, according to Sturm and Barcellona (n. d.), indicate that “SBM is a complex process, can be frustrating and a slow process, and implies additional responsibilities that may take away from teaching responsibilities” (p. 3). Such reform efforts involve school reorganization and/or restructuring. In general, “SBM permits greater flexibility in making decisions concerning students and how they are to be educated” (Candoli, 1995, p. 3).

Steinberg (2014) submits that school reform efforts which give principals greater control and authority in decision making and that greatly impacts student learning and achievement is not new. Steinberg explains that within the last ten years, more urban schools have shifted towards decentralization decision-making strategies. These urban cities include Oakland, Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York City, Seattle and St. Paul, to name a few. The findings of Steinberg’s research on Chicago Public Schools found that district autonomy shifted towards school autonomy in the following general areas: (1) budget; (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (3) calendar and schedule; and, (4) teacher professional development (p. 6). After two years of positive gains that impacted reading scores, the outcome of Steinberg’s empirical study on Chicago Public Schools suggests that both school administrators and teachers require time for adjustment to new organizational changes.

Prior to the study conducted by Steinberg in 2014, Adamson (2012) conducted a doctoral dissertation on principal autonomy in charter, private, and public school settings. Principal autonomy according to Gawlik (as cited in Adamson, p. 2) refers to “the ability of individual school officials to make decisions that affect both internal and external relationships given certain boundaries determined by the government.” In Adamson’s study, principals were evaluated in regards to four critical areas: (1) accountability; (2) personnel management; (3) resource allocation; and, (4) instructional programs (p. iii). The study also focused on principals’ perceptions of autonomy within their schools. That is, the “autonomy principals think they ought to have to lead effectively and the amount of autonomy that they actually possess, given accountability constraints” (Adamson, p. iii). The results of the study, a cross-case analysis, resulted in several emergent themes. In particular, principals felt they had *sufficient* autonomy to

achieve their educational goals but with limited autonomous constraints such as bureaucracy, performance, and accountability. Gaps existed within the areas of personnel management and resources. Finally, Adamson found that collaborative decision making (over time) enhanced principal autonomy and that autonomy was implemented primarily to foster instruction programs to increase student growth and professional learning.

While most studies focus on governance at the school board or district level, this particular research study focuses on rural and non-rural school principals' dispositions regarding autonomy in decision making at the school level (decentralization of district governance) or site-based school management. In this case as a site-based school manager, the principal serves as "mini-superintendent and serves the community/school as the chief executive officer" (Candoli, 1995, p. 6). However, while most school systems have not moved towards this radical, innovative approach, principal accountability to increase student achievement has increased rather than lessened at the school site. With that said, districts are hastened to provide principals with full autonomy (administration and supervision) within their schools. Considering the perspective of Lunenburg (2010, p. 6), "decentralization, with no coordination from the top, would be undesirable." Thus, institutional and organizational support is critical to an effective climate of change. How this is accomplished is dependent upon several factors. According to Lunenburg & Ornstein (as cited in Lunenburg, 2010, pp. 5 - 6) several factors define the degree in which a school is effectively decentralized: (1) the number of decisions made at lower levels (staff), (2) importance of decisions are made at lower levels (teachers make major decisions), (3) the scope of decisions made at the lower (teachers make decisions on more than one function), and (4) amount of checking on school principals (superintendents rarely check on the decisions of principals). More importantly, "decentralization has value only to the extent that it assists a school district or school to achieve its goals effectively" (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 6).

This study aims to discover areas of principal (rural and non-rural) autonomy within their schools. There lies a paucity of research on principals' dispositions regarding the "autonomy that they actually possess" in their schools (Adamson, 2012, p. iv). More research is needed to determine the type(s) of autonomy granted to principals to govern their schools that will greatly impact student achievement. The purpose of this research study is to gain insight into the dispositions of both rural and non-rural principals regarding their autonomy in school based governance under the Race to the Top legislation and to provide a platform for further in-depth studies regarding evidence-based practices involving decentralized efforts of school districts that permit and support principal autonomy in site-based school management as a strategy to improve student outcomes in the second half of the 21st century.

To this end, this quantitative research study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are rural and non-rural school principals' dispositions regarding autonomy in school governance?
2. How do dispositions of rural principals compare to that of non-rural principals regarding autonomy in school governance? Are there any significant differences between the two groups?

Theoretical Framework

This research endeavor is guided by the facilitative leadership theory (Green, 2013). The principal, as the transformational leader, focuses specifically on a facilitative and communicative process to manage the school. According to Green (2013), school leaders “inspire their followers to look beyond self-interest and focus on knowledge of learning, teaching, and student development for use in making management decisions” (p. 105). According to Dufour (as cited in Green), as a facilitative leader, school leadership is based upon collective inquiry to make important decisions that impact school climate and culture. Green continues, by stating that other components are influential in creating a positive school climate and culture while using a facilitative leadership style. This includes “develop (sic) collaborative teams and facilitate (sic) the involvement of all stakeholders” (p. 105). The goal of utilizing such facilitative style of leadership is to collectively “adapt, solve problems, and improves student performance” (Green, p. 105). Ultimately as Green (p. 105) posits, “the leader can feel free to let go of control and followers become willing to act independently, sharing accountability for goal attainment without fear of reprisal.”

Methodology

The researcher submitted two questions to be answered by this study. In order to answer these research questions, this study used a quantitative methodology that facilitates an analysis of the variables in the study. The researcher determined that a non-experimental approach utilizing descriptive and parametric statistics would be the most appropriate for a secondary data analysis study. The instrument used in this study was the 2015 Tennessee Educator Survey – Administrator Core: School Climate created by the Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation, and Development and the Tennessee Department of Education (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). The TN Educator Survey provides analyses of school climate and leadership, instructional practice, teacher evaluation and improvement, and state initiatives (RTI²/Professional Learning trainings). For this study, the researcher examined the 2015 TN Educator Survey topic of school climate and leadership, more specifically autonomy in school based governance. Surveys were differentiated by role: Teacher Survey, Building Administrator Survey, Certified School-Level Support Staff Survey, and District Survey. More specifically for this study, responses from the Building Administrator Core Survey were analyzed.

Sample Population

Eighty-two principals (building administrators) in this study were analyzed from five rural and non-rural school districts, all located in the vicinity of a large urban city in southwestern Tennessee. The district personnel were selected based on convenience (50% or more collective district respondents). Surveys were distributed by email to all school personnel in mid-April of 2015 and the survey closed May 2015. The survey results were made publically available where district participation rates reached at least 50%. District personnel responses were obtained from the Tennessee Department of Education website and inputted into SPSS 23.

Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis was performed on the sample group to obtain a clear understanding of the group. Standard deviations were determined during data analysis and reported as well. To compare mean scores of differences groups, the researcher performed an independent-samples t-test. There were two independent sample populations included in this study, rural and non-rural school districts. An independent samples t-test was utilized to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the two groups (i.e. whether rural and non-rural principals differ significantly in terms of their dispositions regarding autonomy in building level governance). An effect size statistic provided an indication of the magnitude of the differences between the groups. The results of the analysis procedures were interpreted and evaluated for implications.

Findings

Principal responses by district level designation (rural and non-rural) are germane towards aspects of autonomy in school-based governance. In support of garnering the capacity for change, that is, “to improve the instructional program... and improve student achievement” which ultimately impacts school climate” (Green, 2013, p. 236) and to analyze principal autonomy as it relates to school governance or site-based school management, eleven Tennessee Educator Survey items were used in this study. The survey items included:

- (1) Selecting teachers new to this school;
- (2) Removing teachers/Teacher transfers;
- (3) Establishing student discipline procedures;
- (4) Establishing school budget priorities;
- (5) Establishing teacher salaries and benefits;
- (6) Establishing the school’s staffing structure;
- (7) Creating teacher leadership roles;
- (8) Establishing the school mission and vision;
- (9) Evaluating teachers;
- (10) Determining the content of in- service PD for teachers at this school; and,
- (11) Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials. (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015)

Research Question 1: *What are rural and non-rural school principals’ dispositions regarding autonomy in school governance or site based school management?*

Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of autonomy in school governance related items for principals. Inspection of the percentages of agreement and strong agreement for these items reveal that only with respect to establishing teacher salaries and benefits, results of principals are as less than optimal (77.1%.) At the other extreme, some 65.9% of the respondents agree that they have autonomy at the school level evaluating teachers, while 64.6% of the respondents feel that they have considerable autonomy establishing student discipline procedures in their schools.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages for Principal Autonomy School Governance Items

| Item | Considerable | | Some | | None | | NA | |
|--|--------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| Selecting teachers new to this school. | 40 | 48.8 | 34 | 41.5 | 8 | 9.8 | 0 | 0 |
| Removing teachers/ Teacher transfers | 22 | 26.8 | 34 | 41.5 | 22 | 26.8 | 4 | 4.9 |
| Establishing student discipline procedures. | 53 | 64.6 | 26 | 31.7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1.2 |
| Establishing school budget priorities. | 16 | 19.5 | 27 | 32.9 | 28 | 34.1 | 6 | 7.3 |
| Establishing teacher salaries and benefits. | 3 | 3.7 | 1 | 1.2 | 64 | 77.1 | 14 | 17.1 |
| Establishing the school's staffing structure. | 11 | 13.4 | 37 | 45.1 | 30 | 36.6 | 4 | 4.9 |
| Creating teacher leadership roles. | 42 | 51.2 | 34 | 41.5 | 5 | 6.1 | 1 | 1.2 |
| Establishing the school mission and vision. | 50 | 61.0 | 27 | 32.9 | 5 | 6.1 | 0 | 0 |
| Evaluating teachers | 54 | 65.9 | 8 | 9.8 | 1 | 1.2 | 19 | 23.2 |
| Determining the content of in-service PD for teachers at this school | 43 | 52.4 | 34 | 41.5 | 4 | 4.9 | 1 | 1.2 |
| Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials | 7 | 8.5 | 54 | 65.9 | 16 | 19.5 | 5 | 6.1 |

N = 82

Research Question 2: *How do dispositions of rural principals compare to that of non-rural principals regarding autonomy in school governance or site-based school management? Are there any significant differences between the two groups?*

An independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences in the autonomy of school governance indices between rural and non-rural principals. Results from the t-tests ($\alpha = .05$) in Table 2 show that one out of the eleven mean differences for each statement were statistically significant between respondents' school governance dispositions. Only one item proved to be significantly different. A significant difference in rural and non-rural principals' response with respect to evaluating teachers was observed ($t(80) = 5.64, p = .000, d = .28$). The difference favored the rural principal's collective responses. Cohen's d was calculated to be .28 indicating a large effect size. The 95% confidence intervals for the average school governance disposition of evaluating teachers score ranged from .868 to 1.81.

With respect to the item-level means and standard deviation for groups (Table 2), few differences are observed. The mean and standard deviation was calculated for each of the school based governance and/or site-based school management practices in for principals in rural and non-rural schools. Among individual, it is noteworthy that the means obtained across all eleven items differed for both rural principals ($M = 3.16, SD = 0.66$) and non-rural principals ($M = 2.98, SD = 0.77$) indicating a more positive disposition regarding school based governance (autonomy) between rural principals than non-rural principals

Table 2

Results for Comparisons of Responses for Rural Principals and Non-Rural Principals' Autonomy in School Governance/SBSM Items Using t-tests

| Item | <u>Rural</u> | | <u>Non-Rural</u> | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|--|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------|----------|---------------------|
| | <u>Principals</u> | | <u>Principals</u> | | | | |
| | <i>(n = 37)</i> | | <i>(n = 45)</i> | | | | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| Selecting teachers new to this school. | 3.38 | .721 | 3.40 | .618 | -0.14 | .884 | 0.029 |
| Removing teachers/ Teacher transfers | 3.03 | .799 | 2.80 | .894 | 1.20 | .234 | 0.273 |
| Establishing student discipline procedures. | 3.68 | .475 | 3.53 | .694 | 1.09 | .275 | 0.254 |
| Establishing school budget priorities. | 2.86 | .948 | 2.80 | 1.10 | 0.28 | .778 | 0.058 |
| Establishing teacher salaries and benefits. | 2.03 | .687 | 1.82 | .442 | 1.63 | .106 | 0.363 |
| Establishing the school's staffing structure. | 2.78 | .672 | 2.58 | .839 | 1.23 | .221 | 0.263 |
| Creating teacher leadership roles. | 3.41 | .686 | 3.44 | .659 | -0.26 | .794 | 0.044 |
| Establishing the school mission and vision. | 3.46 | .650 | 3.62 | .576 | -1.20 | .233 | 0.260 |
| Evaluating teachers | 3.92 | .277 | 2.58 | 1.42 | 6.18 | .000* | 1.309 |
| Determining the content of in-service PD for teachers at this school | 3.46 | .691 | 3.44 | .624 | 0.10 | .918 | 0.030 |
| Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials | 2.73 | .693 | 2.80 | .694 | -0.45 | .649 | 0.100 |

* $p < .05$

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Implications

This study suggests that while both rural and non-rural principals' sense of autonomy in school governance is directly linked to administrative roles, a vital element of instructional leadership for both organizational and school improvement focused on student achievement is equally important. Sergiovanni and Green (2015) indicate that "the emphasis is on instructional leadership, and whether principals like this emphasis or not, the expectation is there" (p. 60). Indeed, the role of the instructional leader has drastically changed over the past twenty years. With the enactment of the *era of accountability* (i.e., No Child Left Behind in 2001; Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015), the instructional leader must hone a brevity of skills directly related to innovation in teaching and learning and organizational management to increase student achievement. Based upon the theory of *loose-coupling*, Elmore (2000) supports the aforementioned statement in that "innovation in schools ... occur in the structures that surround teaching and learning... in particular site-based governance structures that engage in decision making about everything except the conditions of teaching and learning" (p. 6). Elmore elaborates that "direct involvement in instruction is among the least frequent activities performed by administrators of any kind..." (p. 7). This is evident by the type of indices presented in this secondary analysis research. While the eleven items or indices directly reflect the role of the principal as administrator, very few, if any, directly relate to the role of the principal as instructional leader, with the exception of determining the content of professional development which varied from importance of rural and non-rural principals. Hopkins (as cited in Harris, 2004) posits that a direct and intentional focus on instructional improvement is a major foci in school improvement efforts, particularly in the most challenging school environments.

However, in regards to school climate, the results of this study indicate that creating a vision and mission is chief in creating positive organizational change and building capacity in regards to centralization and successful implementation of site-based governance. The work of Sturm and Barcellona (n. d.) supports this finding in this research study by indicating that the vision and mission should be heralded as the primary focus throughout the reorganization process and directly linked to student outcomes when committing to an autonomous, site-based school management or centralized school governance. The finding in this research study on creating the vision and mission as a vital leadership practice for both rural and non-rural schools in successful site-based governance is supported by the facilitative leadership style theory (Green, 2013). That is, "the school's vision and mission can be developed, communicated, and implemented, involving all stakeholders" (Green, 2013, p. 105). Essentially, "the shared vision motivates the constituents in achieving the objectives of the didactic organization" (Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015, p. 80).

Recommendations for Practice

The results of this study imply that principal autonomy in schools are manifested in administrative duties such as evaluating teachers, establishing the mission and vision, and establishing student discipline procedures. While Fullan (2014) highly suggests hiring great teachers (human capital) as potential leaders, perhaps the goal in creating effective leaders is two-fold. It is recommended that higher education institutions preparing school leaders

(principals and superintendents) begin re-conceptualizing how to develop great educational leaders (human capital) who encompass effective, strong, and exceptional transformational leadership skills (see Whitmire, 2012; Cheney et al., 2010) and possess proficiency in implementing innovative approaches towards organizational change and management such as a decentralization approach of district-based school management. Moreover, training potential school leaders to become transformative school leaders involves what Harris (2004) references as a *contextualized approach*, knowledge of “a high degree of flexibility and diversity to meet the needs of different types of students in different types of schools” (p. 702). Based upon the results from this study, the theory of contextualization takes upon a similar framework involving an intrusive and *experiential learning approach* to develop and support future and practicing school leaders that transforms educational practice. In this approach, potential and practicing school leaders learn through an embedded hands-on approach. Each contextualized learning experience is based upon a diverse and different environmental setting within both rural and non-rural landscapes. In such diverse and different school contexts, the experience is differentiated so that principals are prepared for the diverse challenges of both advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Harris).

It is recommended that more school improvement research is needed to determine new and innovative organizational structures (i.e., to address diversity of urban, rural, or stem-focus schools) that reflect changes in society and diverse populations of students and parents that are stakeholders of such schools. The number of qualified school administrators needed to fill vacancies that will exist in the next five years is not available, creating a need for the recruitment, preparation, and placement of highly effective, strong, and exceptional leaders to fill the anticipated need (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). Thus, the challenge of identifying and employing the type of leadership needed will intensify over the next five years. Therefore, selection and preparation of future principals to lead 21st century schools must be methodical based upon their leadership characteristics, leadership experiences, ethical standards, and support from an outstanding and effective principal who has successfully led change in schools and who will be willing to coach the assistant principal to become an excellent and outstanding principal. To meet the goals of both colleges of education and diverse school districts, creating a forum encompassing local school leaders and higher education personnel is essential to building relationships and sustaining collaborative efforts that will increase the likelihood of placing effective and successful school leaders in targeted settings to increase student performance. Finally, these suggestions, as Harris (2004) contends “...are not intended as a recipe or blueprint for change as inevitably the amalgam of improvement strategies” but in fact “will depend on context and the particular growth state of the school” (p. 701) and the school district.

Conclusion

Whitmire (2012) states that an autonomous principal model is a change process involving the hiring, evaluating, and firing of staff. In addition, he states that principals need more autonomy over such areas as “staffing, time, program, budget...to reallocate resources to support instructional excellence, schedule, and district policy that affect their goals” (p. 8). Alternatively, the views of Elmore (as cited in Beck & Murphy, 1998) conclude that such organizational restructuring as site-based management or centralized school governance should be made judiciously and with caution of “moving boxes around in a structure” (p. 383). Adding to this

position statement, Hanson (as cited in Fullan & Watson, 2000, p. 461) states that “decentralization...must be built by...changing long established behaviors and attitudes...and convincing people in the center who enjoy exercising power to give it up.” This type of change process has a direct impact upon the school’s culture and climate, and more importantly, student learning and achievement. In addition,

without the buy-in from teachers within the school and support (shared decision making) of the superintendent, the central office staff (participatory leadership), and stakeholders (larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of the community), the school governance or site-based management concept will not succeed. (Green, 2013, p. 106)

Simply, the management style of the leader is central to *reform and change* in schools. Cheney, et al. (2010) urge educational leaders and stakeholders to deliberate upon this notion of reform and change in schools. They exclaim “to dramatically improve our nation’s public schools, we must focus on the essential role of school leaders” (p. 10). Hall and Hord (2015) contend that if structural or programmatic change is non-existent within the district or school, then it is doubtful that there will be a change in expected outcomes. Essentially, several key district reform changes such as decentralization can sustainably occur for strong, effective and exemplary principals to be successful. As Walker (2002) contends, “opposing theoretical arguments...imply that decentralization is far more complex in its implications for schools than is popularly understood” (p. 5). Because this disposition is highly conflictual, more “closer intellectual scrutiny of this concept is warranted” (Walker, p. 5).

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