



Attracting Principals to the Superintendency

Anecdotal reports suggest that fewer people currently are applying for administrative positions than in previous years (e.g., Cooper, Fusarelli, Carelli, 2000; Pugmire, 1999; Steinberg, 2000). Some may hesitate to pursue leadership positions because of the demands of such jobs, increased pressure to show “results,” and inadequate remuneration (e.g., Cooley & Shen, 2000; Gewertz, 2000; Houston, 1998). Although professional organizations have focused on what appear to be dwindling numbers of applicants for principal and superintendent jobs (e.g., NAESP/NAASP, 1998), little research to date has examined why educators are reluctant to pursue these positions.

Focusing on the conditions of the superintendency that might encourage or discourage school leaders from applying for vacant positions, a team of researchers affiliated with Ohio’s Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools recently conducted a survey of principals in that state. These principals represent the group from which new recruits to the superintendency in Ohio are most likely to be drawn.

The Study

Principals rated the extent to which certain conditions would influence their decisions to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency. These conditions were organized into three scales, which corresponded to incentives and disincentives (i.e., motivators) identified in previous research: (1) the satisfaction associated with “making a difference,” (2) the satisfaction—or dissatisfaction—associated with extrinsic rewards such as salary and benefits, and (3) the dissatisfaction associated with the difficulty of the job. In addition to evaluating the salience of these conditions, the researchers also examined the impact of personal and contextual characteristics on principals’ ratings of the three sets of motivators.

Research Findings

Analyses of the more than 500 responses to the survey uncovered specific “appealing” and “unappealing” work conditions that were most likely to affect principals’ decisions to pursue the job of superintendent. Principals found four conditions most appealing: (1) the chance to have a greater impact, (2) the anticipated satisfaction associated with “making a difference,” (3) the opportunity to implement creative personal ideas, and (4) the anticipated satisfaction associated

with the ability to provide support to school and district staff. They found four conditions least appealing: (1) the increased burden of responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates; (2) the need to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator’s control; (3) low levels of board support; and (4) excessive pressure to perform.

The study also compared the extent to which principals found the three sets of conditions, represented by the three major scales, to be important. Principals rated Making a Difference as most important, *Job Difficulty* as second most important, and *Extrinsic Motivators* as third.

Principals and School Context Characteristics

Across personal and contextual categories, principals seemed to hold more similar than different views of the superintendency. However, there were a few small, though significant, differences. Principals with less teaching experience than their counterparts were more likely to rate job difficulty as important to the decision to pursue the superintendency. In addition, “cosmopolitanism” predicted ratings on the *Extrinsic Motivators* scale. Cosmopolitan principals (i.e., those who tend to be more career-bound than place-bound) were more likely to view the salary and benefits associated with the superintendency as important. No school context features, such as rural/non-rural locale, school SES, or school size, significantly influenced the strength of the principals’ concerns for the three primary conditions characterizing superintendents’ work.

Recommendations

Findings from this study provide some guidance to boards of education and state policy makers who seek to make the superintendency more attractive to principals.

Teach Administrators How to Make a Difference

Principals rated *Making a Difference* as the most important reason guiding their choice to pursue a position as superintendent. This finding has important ramifications for those who design university preparation and professional development programs for school leaders. By focusing on effective reform strategies, such programs could provide school administrators with the tools for “making a difference” in their districts. Doing so would build on these educators’ intrinsic motives for pursuing leadership roles.

Support Superintendents' Efforts

Local school boards could also create conditions that support superintendents' efforts to enact meaningful change. For example, increasing a superintendent's term of contract may give the school leader a reasonable chance to have a significant impact on district performance (cf. Yee & Cuban, 1996). In addition, developing clear yet attainable goals for a superintendent would enable him or her to undertake reform without feeling burdened by unrealistic expectations. Recognizing that improvement takes time, the board and the superintendent could join forces to promote long-term progress through the accomplishment of important short- and midrange improvements.

Create Attractive Incentive Packages

Principals in the study, particularly those with cosmopolitan commitments, rated "extrinsic motivators" (such as salary and benefits) as important. This finding is especially relevant to policy makers in Ohio, where the majority of principals view themselves as cosmopolitan. Because most school leaders in the state are likely to take extrinsic motivators into account when they think about job options, local boards and state policy makers should create incentive packages to attract aspiring superintendents. Incentives to consider as part of such packages include salary, portable retirement plans, annuities, insurance, tuition reimbursements, expense account allowances, and moving expenses (e.g., Educational Research Services, 1990; Heller, 1991; Shannon, 1987).

Promote Local Accountability

Principals expressed high levels of concern about the challenges faced by superintendents in the current era of accountability. In particular, they anticipated that external mandates would impose significant burdens, especially in the cases in which school leaders were held accountable for outcomes beyond their control. This finding suggests that the current focus on accountability may be increasing the stress associated with the already burdensome job of superintendent (e.g., Cooley & Shen, 2000). One promising alternative is for districts to focus on accountability requirements that respond to local concerns, downplaying unreasonable accountability mandates developed by policy makers who are unfamiliar with local circumstances (e.g., Mathews, 1996).

Experience Counts

In this study, principals who had spent fewer years as teachers were more concerned about the difficulties associated with the superintendency than were principals with longer tenure as teachers. This finding suggests that the career trajectory of school leaders may have an influence on their willingness to undertake the role of chief executive officer. Given this finding, districts might be best served over the long term by discouraging inexperienced teachers from applying for the job of principal. Arguably, inexperienced teachers are less well prepared than their more experienced colleagues to provide instructional leadership even at the building level.



References

- Cooley, V.E., & Shen, J. (2000). Factors influencing applying for urban principalship. *Education and Urban Society*, 32(4), 443-454.
- Cooper, B.S., Fusarelli, L.D., & Carella, V.A. (2000). *Career crisis in the superintendency? The results of a national survey*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 143 167).
- Educational Research Services. (1990). *Fringe benefits for superintendents in public schools, 1989-90*. Part I of national survey of fringe benefits in public schools. Arlington, VA: Author.
- Gewertz, C. (2000, July 12). Reader's Digest grants will focus on school leadership. *Education Week*, 19(42), 15.
- Heller, R.W. (1991). Negotiating for retirement. *American School Board Journal*, 178(8), 18-22.
- Houston, P.D. (1998, June 3). The ABCs of administrative shortages. *Education Week*, 17(38). Retrieved October 8, 2001 from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/1998/38houst.h17>.
- Mathews, D. (1996). *Is there a public for public schools?* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.
- National Association of Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals. (1998). *Is there a shortage of qualified candidates for openings in the principalship? An exploratory study*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Pugmire, T. (1999, April 10). *The principal shortage*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Public Radio. Retrieved October 8, 2001 from http://news.mpr.org/features/199908/30_pugmire_safety/principal.shtml.
- Shannon, T.A. (1987). Follow this map into the new world of superintendent compensation. *American School Board Journal*, 174(3), 35-37, 44.
- Steinberg, J. (2000, September 3). Nation's schools struggling to find enough principals. *New York Times*, p. A1.
- Yee, G., & Cuban, L. (1996). When is tenure long enough? An historical analysis of superintendent turnover and tenure in urban school districts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32, 615-641.



OHIO
UNIVERSITY