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Changes in Principal Evaluation Standards: A Case Study of North Dakota Principals

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In recent years, increased demands and political scrutiny have been placed upon schools to improve student achievement. With these demands, a principal's role is paramount (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Reeves, 2009). School principals are second only to classroom teachers in influencing student achievement (Grissom & Loeb 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Likewise, Fenton, Kelemen, et al., (2010) and Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) conclude that principal quality accounts for nearly 25% of a school's total impact on student achievement.

Therefore, as principals' roles evolve, evaluating their performance becomes imperative in informing superintendents about the principals' competence and influencing future actions to improve outcomes. Research on the topic of principal evaluation is minimal. But scarcer is scholarship conveying the voices of school principals regarding their evaluation process, especially as evaluation standards are changing. This case study sought greater understanding of the range of experiences and perceptions across a statewide demographic of principals, both rural and urban, as the state moved to revise and update evaluation standards.

Literature Review

A growing body of research on principal evaluations have revealed that evaluation instruments (1) failed to focus on the right things, (2) were not based on clear performance standards, and (3) did not align with best practices in evaluation theory (Condon & Clifford, 2010; Goldring et al., 2009; Kearney, 2005; Reeves, 2009). Goldring and her colleagues (2009) found that evaluation systems focused on "general management" and often failed to pay closer attention to "critical behaviors that... influence student achievement" (p.34). Most evaluations have consisted of a checklist to comply with district policies, resulting in very little impact on principals' professional development and other school outcomes (McMahon, Peters, & Schumacher, 2014).

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Moreover, evaluation instruments have not directly aligned with research-based professional standards; most relied on rating scales rather than rubric-based assessments (Goldring, 2009; Kimball, Heneman, & Milanowski, 2007). Reeves (2009) found that “the standards themselves are ambiguous or the performance expectations are unclear” (2009, p. 4).

Principal evaluation systems have also been plagued with lack of rigor in design and implementation as well as inadequate reliability (Goldring et al., 2009). Regardless of the limitations of evaluations, most principals viewed their evaluations as fair and consistent, although some question if evaluations improve job performance (Muenich, 2014; Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengston, 2012). Principals considered evaluation an ongoing process and value feedback and support from their evaluators “as [a] component of ... daily communication and... formal evaluation” (Parylo et al., 2012, p.228). Lastly, many principals regarded students’ achievement as the most important criterion for evaluation (Muenich, 2014; Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengston, 2012).

The common theme found in the literature was that recent evaluations did not align in practice, and therefore, it is imperative to understand principals’ perceptions and experiences as evaluation policies and standards are changing. Focusing on the perceptions and experiences of principals helps us better understand how principals view these incipient evaluation changes as well as potential challenges to implementation. If current evaluation measures don't seem to match with what principals do, nor do they align with recommended best practice, it appears that principal evaluation may be missing the target. What are principals’ current perceptions and experiences of principal evaluation processes, specifically as these evaluation processes are changing?

Methods

A descriptive case study methodology was chosen to describe the events and experiences of North Dakota principals undergoing principal evaluation policy changes. The case study is, “an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1989, p. 23). “[C]ase study...does not represent a ‘sample,’ and the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)” (Yin, 1989, p. 21).

A case study was chosen because it could best represent a holistic view of the phenomena (experiences of change in principal evaluation) and, in this case, provides the complexity using both voices of principals as well as policy and context documents to provide a more complete picture of the perceptions of change in principal evaluations. This case study sought greater understanding of the experiences and perceptions of principals as the state moved to revise and update principal evaluation standards.

The larger, statewide setting of North Dakota was chosen in order to provide insight into the “uniqueness and complexity” of principal evaluation in North Dakota, and “its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts” (Stake, 1995, p. 16) because North Dakota could offer a case where school sizes had great variability; thus principals with diverse experiences. While this data

can also be used to inform state policy so that the implementation of principal evaluation standards and future changes could address the needs of North Dakota students, schools, and principals, the rationale for selecting North Dakota specifically was to examine the widest range of school sizes to ensure the researchers solicited the widest range of experiences from principals. North Dakota was selected as the setting for this case study because it provided variability among responses; small school (enrollment: 32) principals to larger school (enrollment: 1,414) principals.

Data Collection

Data consisted of two main types: primarily, interviews; and secondarily, documentation (Yin, 1989). First, 30-45 minute focused interviews (Yin, 1989) were conducted with 31 North Dakota principals in Summer and Fall, 2014. Principals were asked about their experiences with principal evaluation and their perceptions and feelings about potential evaluation changes. Specifically, principals were asked: (1) Tell me what principal evaluations mean in your situation. In your opinion, what are the biggest benefits to principal evaluation? What are its biggest limitations? (2) How has principal evaluation changed since you became a principal? What have your experiences been with those changes (if applicable)? Where do you see principal evaluation going in ND? Where do you think it should go and how should it be used? Participants were recruited at the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL) summer leadership conference and through snowball sampling.

Second, documentation data was collected about the case itself through policy documents, blogs, and news articles which included the state principal evaluation standards, and memorandums about incipient changes. These documents were found through online searches and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction website. This archival data was analyzed to create a comprehensive description of the case and to provide insight into principal interview data, especially as related to the timing of principal evaluation standard changes at the time the interviews were conducted.

Participants

Participants were eight elementary principals, four middle school principals, 11 secondary principals, and eight combination principals (Mid/Secondary and Elementary/Mid/Secondary). The demographics of the overall sample differed from the larger population of North Dakota schools (171 Elementary, 24 Middle/Jr. High, 32 Secondary, 135 combination schools, and 10 one room/teacher schools) ("ND Educational Directory," 2014). Seventy-one percent of the interview participants were male (N=22) and 29% were female (N=9). Enrollments at these schools ranged from 32 to 1,414. The average enrollment was 356.42. Because the research question involved principal perceptions, sampling the widest range of principals meant drawing from the smallest schools (32 students) to the largest schools (1,414 students). North Dakota was an ideal state to use as a case because it could draw principals from remote frontier areas with one-room schools to larger urban areas with greater populations.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of North Dakota principals as state principal evaluation standards are changing. The questions that guided the study were: (a) How do principals perceive evaluation measures (current, past and future) as accurate, consistent and reliable measures of their performance? (b) How do North Dakota principals perceive principal evaluation? (c) What are the perceptions of North Dakota principals regarding incipient evaluation changes? Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, a description of the case setting and chronology of events in the principal evaluation policy changes was created using state policy documents. Understanding the setting informed data analysis of the transcribed interviews. Within case study methodology, we analyzed the embedded units or interviews (Yin, 1989) using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba 1985) to search for commonalities of terms in the responses. Open coding process was utilized to break sentences down into “meaningful units” to which labels were attached (Gardner, 2009, p.103). These units identified the following themes: (a) inconsistent measures of performance, (b) feedback and (c) concerns.

Results

Inconsistent measures of performance. The majority of principals interviewed reported being evaluated by their superintendent or assistant superintendent. Principals reported that while the evaluations have been fair, positive, and often viewed as a tool for improvement, most have been informal and not based on clear research-based performance standards. Therefore, many principals deemed these evaluations as an inconsistent measure of principals’ performance accompanied by unclear expectations.

One male high school principal explained: “we had to fill out what we were doing and set goals... [W]e would [then] meet with the assistant superintendent and he would read... what we thought we were doing well... [T]here wasn’t much ...that stated that you need to do this better.” Similarly, a female elementary school principal commented that in her first year she was asked to make a list of things that have given her direction as principal. The supervisor then, “asked for the list ... [and] addressed maybe a couple of things...[A]fter that it was just like a brief narrative that said pretty much the same thing every year.”

Another principal elaborated that while evaluations were based on professional learning communities’ model, they were “somewhat objective...but fairly subjective” because the district lacked a standard-based evaluation tool. A male middle school principal remarked that while he regarded his superintendent as a great mentor, evaluations were rather “generic and vague” because his district lacked a comprehensive evaluation tool.

Another male elementary school principal expressed that though he constantly interacted with his evaluator to share successes and concerns, the evaluation was an inconsistent measure of his performance. It often entailed yes or no questions, followed by a brief narrative and suggestions for improvement. He explained, “My evaluator didn’t seem to know what he was evaluating.” A female elementary school principal shared that her evaluation was mainly a “manager evaluation,” focusing solely on “day to day duties” of a principal. Finally, one K-12 principal

commented that although he visited daily with the person responsible for his evaluations (unspecified supervisor), there was no formal evaluation. Rather, the evaluator only intervened “if there was a problem.”

Feedback

A majority of the principals interviewed viewed feedback as an essential element in their growth and success as educators, and lack of feedback as detrimental. Many conceptualized feedback as a form of support. Therefore, principals valued any feedback they could get from their evaluators. One female high school principal expressed, “I felt like it helped me focus on goals and connect with how my performance was received with people that mattered.”

A male high school principal stated that he sat down with his supervisor “...every quarter ...about our progress... [and] goals ...and he would provide me with some solid feedback.” This process allowed the principal and superintendent to “share some struggles, frustrations” and improvements the principal needed to make. He viewed feedback as a form of “dialogue through self-reflection in having a conversation about performance.”

Concerns

Many principals had concerns about current evaluations as well as about rumors regarding changes in evaluation standards. While many believed that student achievement was an important component in the evaluation process, they feared that judging principal effectiveness solely on student achievement would be unfair. A male high school principal reflected: “I hope that any evaluation...is not tied into test scores. I don’t see a correlation... it makes me a little nervous.” Another male high school principal shared: “I am nervous about how [principal evaluations] will be tied to any kind of state assessment that has no value... for my students.” The principals stated that state assessments represent one aspect of school outcome.

Therefore judging principals solely on how their students achieve on such assessment would not be a fair nor accurate measure of principal effectiveness. Moreover, more fear emerged from the fact that research hasn’t formulated evaluation models connecting student achievement to principal effectiveness. Hence, principals were concerned that state mandated evaluation measures might only be based on student achievement. Regardless of their concerns, most principals still viewed student achievement as their major priority.

Second, principals worried about a statewide move towards more universal principal evaluations. An alternative school’s principal feared that state regulators and some superintendents don’t really know what’s going on in schools. Many principals seemed to enjoy the autonomy and flexibility districts have to evaluate. Most of these principals were used to the informal routines of principal evaluations, even though they sometimes did not really measure what they were supposed to measure. But at the same time, principals feared that state mandated evaluations would not be any better. More specifically, principals anticipated that the state might implement value-added measures outside of the district/school context because many state administrators lacked knowledge about everyday school issues principals have to attend to. Hence many were content with the way things were at the moment unless the state implemented research-based and

fair evaluation measures. However, fear remained that new standards would allow bureaucratic control of the schools at the expense of instructional leadership.

Principals also feared that state-mandated evaluation standards would face implementation dilemmas. One principal stated that there already existed a tension between school personnel and state administrators, and pointed to the implementation failures of NCLB. Consequently, if there was tension between stakeholders, the implementation of these new standards might not be very effective. Moreover, because North Dakota schools differed in their student population size, formulating and implementing universal standards serving the needs of each school might be difficult.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences and perceptions of North Dakota principals as state evaluation standards change. While principal evaluation has changed across many states and districts, from assessing principals as managers to assessing them as instructional leaders, North Dakota remains behind in adopting research-based standards. Most principals reported being evaluated at least once during the academic year. While many perceived their evaluations as fair and often positive, almost all reported that their district's evaluation instruments lacked clear performance standards.

Furthermore, many principals viewed evaluations as informal, often consisting of yes or no checklists that had no impact on their daily duties as school leaders. Sometimes the main component of evaluations was to write a reflection on how they thought they were performing. This finding mirrored McMahon, Peters and Schumacher (2014) that principals perceived evaluations as checklists to comply with district policies, with very little impact on school outcomes. Therefore, as districts continue to use evaluation models that lack research-based standards the question still remains whether or not North Dakota will institute evaluation measures that have impact on school outcomes. Would state mandated formal evaluation eliminate the perception that evaluations are only completed to comply with district policies?

Principals valued feedback from both their evaluators and their peers. They appreciated the opportunity to learn from supervisors "what great work they doing" and how to improve. They discussed how feedback "helped them focus on their goals" and "connect" with how others received their performance. Further, principals perceived feedback as a "dialogue through self-reflection in having a conversation about performance". This finding was congruent with prior research (Parylo, Zepeda, and, Bengston, 2012). As in our study, Parylo and colleagues (2012) discovered that many principals viewed positive formative and summative "feedback as an important component of the daily communication and the formal evaluation" (p. 228). Our data added that many principals appreciated the feedback from their evaluators and viewed it as a form of mentorship. Therefore, it is imperative that any evaluation tools that states implement should include an element allowing some constructive dialogue between principals and evaluators.

This study contributes to the scarce literature on the experiences and perceptions of principals regarding their evaluations. The data suggested that principal evaluation should be based on clear

performance standards. Further, states looking to make principal evaluation changes should address the concerns of principals prior to implementation.

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