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Designing our Principal Pipeline from a Job-embedded Residency

“It’s been a game changer”

-District Administrator

Introduction

The preparation of principals across the United States increasingly reflects a grow-your-own concept mindset in which school districts identify and support aspiring leaders within their district to lead schools. In essence, The Wallace Foundation partnered with six urban school districts to investigate the key components of effective programs to build a principal pipeline (Mendels, 2017). The state of Tennessee has led efforts to encourage districts to form partnerships with universities to guide principal preparation efforts through a dedicated Race to the Top grant awarded in 2010; states across the nation have followed suit. The Texas Education Agency instituted both grow your own teacher and principal preparation grants starting in the 2018 – 2019 school year.

In addition to the grants above, a university in Texas was awarded a federal SEED grant that supported the develop and implementation of a rigorous, 15-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program with partnering school districts in Texas and Louisiana. A primary focus of the principal preparation residency program was to equip aspiring leaders who became principal interns with strong, authentic instructional leadership experiences. The educational leadership faculty served as Faculty Coaches, teaching, leading, and coaching each principal intern in residence throughout the 15 months. One of the pillars of the residency program called for the provision of instructional leadership in context through faculty providing feedback to the principal intern, who was leading instructional coaching of high need teachers on

campus. The principal interns provided instructional and pedagogical support for two struggling teachers on their campus through instructional coaching and specific feedback for interventions. The principal interns conducted four pre-conference, observation, and post-conference cycles using evidence-based rubrics (i.e., state's teacher evaluation tool) aligned to national and state standards with both of their assigned teachers.

Through the process of instructional coaching, the principal interns created an action plan for both teachers by utilizing the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) plan to set annual goals, four quarter Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timebound (SMART) goals, interventions for each specific quarter goal, and progress monitoring for each intervention. Interns monitored and collaborated with the teachers with whom they worked to reach each quarter goal and to implement instructional adjustments to reach the annual goal. The TAIS instrument was originally designed as a school turnaround framework and improvement tool for schools that did not meet the accountability standards set forth by the Texas Education Agency, but here it became a proactive framework to create action plans such that instructional leaders could effectively monitor SMART goals with teachers and use the tool to improve teacher instruction and student outcomes.

Interns in the job-embedded residency led and improved instruction utilizing the TAIS plan, targeting areas of instruction, and monitored the progress of interventions for teachers over the school year. The principal intern also monitored the learning and growth of an English language learner (ELL) and a special education (SPED) student in the course of the program. Interns advocated for the instruction of high need students on campus and led learning conversations with multiple stakeholders involved with the

learning of ELLs and SPED students. In essence the interns explored various forms of data associated with students and led instructional coaching conversations with teachers to meet the individual needs of the students.

In this study, the researchers examined the perception of a district administrator who supervised 14 principal interns participating in the job-embedded principal preparation residency program in Texas. The school district is located in Texas and is categorized to be a mid-size city according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The school district consists of multiple campuses at the elementary, middle school and high school level. The district was wanting to build a pipeline of strong instructional leaders from within their own school district to serve as assistant principals and principals for these campuses. The purpose of the study was to examine the ways in which principal interns who received effective faculty support and effective instructional coaching experiences in a job-embedded principal preparation residency program improve teacher growth and increase student achievement. Principal preparation programs, school districts, and other stakeholders can establish and replicate similar principal preparation experiences that produce highly skilled instructional leaders. The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways did principal interns impact the school district during the 15th-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program?
2. In what ways did the administrative interns impact student achievement through their work in professional learning communities (PLC)s?

Literature Review

The literature that examines the preparation of aspiring principals and assistant principals documents multiple types that exist nationwide, including traditional brick and

mortar settings online collaboration, hybrid approaches, and job-embedded residencies. Crow and Whiteman (2016) found that leadership programs have expanded since 2009 and suggest that refinement and development is needed with respect to “[selecting] candidates, [assigning] faculty [to the programs], design[ing the programs], delivery, pedagogy, internship [design], student assessments, mentoring and coaching, comprehensive leadership development, and program evaluation” (p. 120).

To develop an intern, grow – you – own program, universities and school districts partner together, allowing for an authentic leadership experience which improves the qualities of future principals. Walsh and Backe (2013) emphasized that K-12 schools control the partnerships they establish with universities for leadership training. They identify four main characteristics for effective school-university partnerships: “a shared conceptual understanding, mutuality in roles and relationships, sound operational strategies, and evaluation of both the partnership and its outcomes” (Walsh & Backe, 2013, p. 599). Culture conflicts may exist within partnerships regarding the pace of change that schools encounter and the belief that researchers in the university may not be prepared to work effectively with school districts (Walse & Backe, 2013; Wentworth, Carranza, & Stipek, 2016). On the other hand, school-university partnerships offer opportunities for both the school and university to develop quality programs while also impacting student learning. Universities gain an opportunity to ground research in real-world contexts while developing effective leaders, and schools gain help in creating interventions to solve real, contextual problems (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Winn et al. (2016) note that the process of recruitment of candidates needs to be shaped to meet the problem of practice for the school district.

The grow – your – own concept has driven university practice focusing on developing a well-rounding leader and this begins with recruitment and then develops a partnership that benefits both the university program and the public school. Crow and Whiteman (2016) call for more research on the candidates who enter school leadership preparation programs and on the drivers of effectiveness in recruitment practices, specifically addressing the “use of culturally relevant pedagogies and curriculum, our field experiences, and our mentoring processes” (p. 138). Malone (2001) implied that graduate programs alone do not effectively prepare beginning principals; he called for programs where star principal can coach administrators on a weekly basis in an on-the-job internship. Castro, Germain, and Gooden (2018) emphasized the need to focus on diversity within school administration. They therefore recommended that preparation programs of higher institutions foster school-university partnerships that focus on teachers of color, that there needs to be scholarship opportunities for teacher and principal certification, and that preparation programs should adjust and make changes that are contextual-based for the candidates.

Authentic experiences grounded in the school context, gives the future leaders an opportunity to be fully prepared while having a support system to evaluate the impact decision have on the school and their own understanding. Part of this evaluation involves learning communities or PLC’s (professional learning community) In their evaluation of eight preparation programs for school leaders, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) found that an authentic learning context is key to effective programs. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that include a diverse teaching background of teachers offer such contexts as a means to collectively improve teaching practices and

ensure that students are learning and making progress (Barth et al., 2005; DuFour, 2004; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Stone, 2006). In their review of research on PLCs Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2006) found that PLCs must be structurally sound to make a positive impact on teaching practices and student achievement. DuFour (2004) provides a well-developed structure on professional learning communities that include the following questions for PLC teams to use as a framework:

- (1) What do we want each student to learn?
- (2) How will we know when each student has learned it?
- (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (p. 2).

In subsequent work, DuFour and Reeves (2016) added a fourth driving question:

- (4) How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content? (p. 70).

PLCs provide a solution for stakeholders to collectively solve problems by understanding the dynamics of teachers' instruction and student learning. Since the interns are providing opportunity to become a part of the PLC and then evaluate the progress, leadership decision making with reflective practice become a cornerstone to the overall growth of the future leader. The principal interns provide meaningful ways to contribute to the PLC process, including through data literacy, designing the PLC structure, and using protocols for all teachers to have a voice. Specifically, the interns in collaboration with the PLC team conduct a root cause analysis to identify problems that are contributing to low student outcomes and then develop SMART goals, interventions, and progress monitoring steps. Overall, the aim of the job-embedded residency internship was to identify and select aspiring principals within a district that would learn to successfully coach and grow teachers, provide support and advocacy for special

population groups, and collectively problem solve with a PLC team to improve student outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the theoretical framework of transformational leadership with an emphasis in instructional leadership. Instructional leadership was once defined as educational leadership and management whereas recently the term instructional leadership has been reincarnated into leadership for learning (Hallinger, 2010). As described above, the residency program is designed to prepare aspiring leaders to be principals with strong instructional leadership. This concept aligns with the state of Texas principal certification exam that is titled *instructional leader as principal*.

Transformational leadership calls on leaders to focus on the needs of their followers (Burns, 1978; Wiltshire, 2012), which principals first need to conceptualize the needs of the follower and seek out opportunities for the follower to fulfill their needs. The principal interns involved in the partnerships provided guidance and coaching to teachers to improve their teaching practices and ultimately improve student outcomes. Principals who exhibit transformational leadership through working with teachers on a shared vision of goals and setting high expectations can improve student achievement substantially (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

For student outcomes to be improved and teacher development be enhanced, teachers and principals' relationships need to improve. Marks and Printy (2003) argued that when transformational leadership is integrated with a shared instructional leadership style then student achievement can be substantial. The current study draws on Marks and Printy's as provided by the district administrator into the impact the principal interns and

former principal interns now serving as assistant principals and principals have had within the district. In supporting teachers and their PLC and implementing measures to improve student achievement, interns draw on the learning they acquired through the job-embedded partnerships between the school district and the university.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive case study to examine a job-embedded residency program. Data comes primarily with interviews with a school district administrator on her real-life experiences of supervising the current principal interns who experienced the job-embedded residency program (Yin, 2014). The case study provides an in-depth, rich, informative perspective on the impact the principal interns trained in the program have had in their school district.

Data Sources and Analysis

We conducted a face-to-face interview with the district administrator after being invited and accepted to participate in the study. The district administrator was chosen because she has extensive knowledge of the experiences of the principal interns who have participated in the district's job-embedded principal preparation residency program. The district is a large public school district in Texas that spans multiple campuses from the elementary to the high school level. The interview was recorded and transcribed. The data was coded through NVivo qualitative analysis software where nodes were created to sort and organize the interview responses into potential emerging themes.

The second data source was campus/district reports available through public domain access on the Texas Education Agency website. The Texas Accountability Performance Reports (TAPR) provided data at the campus level with comparison data to

the district and state level. The data was analyzed to assess if student achievement improved while the principals trained in the program served in their school district. The data that was gathered from the TAPR references the core testing subjects. Another words, the data used in Table 1 references student achievement gains or loss from the PLC (i.e., core testing subjects). The PLC data complimented the district administrator when responding to the work the principal interns did with PLCs.

District and University Partnership Findings

Experiences of Interns' Residency Program

At the time of the interview, the partnership between the school district and the university had existed for 5 years. It had trained 12 principal interns and an additional two were participating. One former participant in the program was serving as a middle school principal and the remainder were assistant principals elementary and middle schools. The district, as described by the interviewee, considered the principal interns to be valuable members of the administrative team and would even include them in the district's administrator yearbook.

In the interview, the district administrator highlighted the roles and responsibilities of the principal interns. She said that the fact that a principal intern had been at the campus or a full year was a powerful piece of the job-embedded residency program, that principal interns "actually work with one or two teachers who they need to grow...by coaching that teacher, by showing them different ways at looking at data, different ways of teaching, pedagogy, and classroom management." At the end of the year, the principal interns provide evidence to show the district personnel how they supported and grew teachers, PLCs, and special population students.

The principal interns have several duties within the school setting: attending special education, ARD meetings, 504 meetings, and hot and heated parent conferences and analyzing assessments. They also led data digs and served on committees within the campus. In this school district, the principal interns were there to serve as support to the students, which required them to work through student support teams. They even support students through outside of school activities, such as producing a play, coaching football and basketball, and supervising trunk or treat events.

Reciprocal mentoring. When the partnership with the school district first started, it fell to the district administrator to hire mentors for the principal intern. These mentors would play a valuable part in fostering a meaningful learning experience for the principal interns. However, finding the right mentor for the residency program's learning objectives was not always easy. The district administrator described the search process as a learning experience that required her to monitor changes to the program over time so as to select good mentors every year. She described flexibility as her major criteria for principal interns. One principal intern had been moved three times prior to the school year. He had made the best of the situation and she felt he would ascend to the principal role very soon, in part because of this flexibility.

The district administrator said that a mentor should be willing to learn, open, and transparent. Mentors must be able to provide support even though they might not have all the answers. The mentor needs to allow the principal intern to do the work the university principal preparation program requires, which includes shadowing the mentor on a whole school day.

The district, as described by the interviewee, wanted there to be a two-way street of learning, and thus put into place structures to support reciprocal mentoring. The principal interns were new to the field of administrative work, but the district administrator described them as “vivacious, ready, [and] energetic.... go-getters [who] could support the principal that may or may not have been in that level or at that level.”

Bring skill to the table. The administrator stated that participating in the job-embedded residency program has definitely made an impact in the school district. In talking about the impact of the program, she frequently used the phrases, “bring a lot to the table” and “sit up a little taller.” For example, she said, the principal interns “bring a lot to the table as far as supporting the school administration for that particular campus.” At professional development meetings where the principal interns and/or assistant principals who were former principal interns of the program are in attendance, other participants in the room “sit up a little taller,” she claimed, implying that the people in the program raised the standards of professionalism in the room. She felt that the program had “made [administrators in the district] much more [of] consumer[s] of knowledge”, because they had been a part of the PLC process and then evaluated the progress the school made in the authentic leadership experience.

With respect to the value of reciprocal mentoring, the district administrator said that the principal interns’ support for principals is immensely valuable. The district, as described by the interviewee, also wanted the other assistant principals in the district to have the opportunity to learn from the principal interns who participated in the job-embedded residency program to enhance their skill-set.

The district administrator perceives that the principal interns have made an impact on teacher growth and student performance in the district. She said that it can be “really hard” for school administrators “to work with a teacher who may or may not want to grow.” Yet she felt that the principal interns had successfully coached teacher and helped them grow, as evidenced in the showcase professional presentation that the program uses to show the data how teachers have grown as their students’ performance has increased.

Ready for Leadership

Upon completion of the principal preparation residency program, the principal interns continue to be valuable assets to the school district as described by the interviewee. Of the 12 past principal interns, 11 had received job offers for leadership positions including assistant principal or principal jobs in the course of their internship, and the remainder had received an offer soon after completion of the residency program. The district administrator said that she starts receiving emails from current sitting principals in the school district seeking to hire principal interns around January and February of each school year. As she explained, the principal interns are highly sought after because they are already trained to “hit the road running” and principals have no time to train an assistant principal. The principal interns are ready to work and to work with teachers who are not achieving their goals. As assistant principals, they dissect data, grow teachers, and ultimately impact student performance. The district administrator highlighted that the principal interns who participated in the residency program brought a high level of conversation and sophistication to the hiring process that resulted in their hire. As she summarized, “They win...they win.”

PLC Findings

The principal preparation residency program provided a structure where the principals select two teachers and work with them through the year, lead/facilitate a PLC, and support and advocate for students who are in special population groups. The district administrator provided findings on the overall impact the principal interns have made in their school district, comparing student results from previous years. Prior to the school year, the principal intern conducts an equity audit. During the equity audit examination, the principal intern identifies a content area that has shown weakness in student performance data. Once the content area of need is identified, the intern presents the equity audit findings to the mentor principal, and the intern and the mentor principal decide what PLC the principal intern will lead or facilitate.

Throughout the school year, the principal interns provide support for teachers through the PLC to improve student outcomes. This begins with conducting a needs assessment to identify root causes of low student performance. The principal intern then creates a SMART annual goal, four SMART quarter goals, interventions for each quarterly goal, and progress monitoring strategies for each intervention. For example, one principal intern identified the problem the PLC would focus on as the fact that 56% of students had limited progress on the previous year State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) assessment, and only 18% of the students were on track to pass. In collaboration with the PLC team, the intern set an annual goal that by the end of the school year, 45% of students would “expected progress” on the STAAR administration and 28% would be on track to pass the end of year STAAR assessment. To this end, he set third quarter goals that (1) 100% of teachers on the campus would

have included two intentional small group interventions within their lesson plans (2) teachers would have utilized their PLC collaborative planning time to create instructional resources and prepare for student intervention through formative assessment, (3) teachers would have documented the students’ engagement in the two small group interventions, and (4) teachers would have delivered two common formative assessments to track growth and progress of all students and particularly those who received the small group intervention. This intern is labeled as 5^b, 6^b, and 7^b in Table 1 below. His data shows that the teachers in his building met the goals in all three of the content areas, except for one area which actually went from 5% masters level to 4% masters level resulting in the 20% loss. Also, it is important to note that Table 1 shows data for only 7 of the interns. All the interns led or facilitated PLCs however not all the PLCs were considered testing areas by the State of Texas, therefore there was limited data we could gather from the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR).

Table 1

Gain or Loss of STAAR Percent at the Approaches and Masters Grade Level for PLC Intern Led or Facilitated

Intern	1	2	3	4	5 ^b	6 ^b	7 ^b	8	9
Approaches	32%	-5%	-34%	-19%	5%	6%	7%	13%	-2%
Masters	33%	30%	N/A	400%	-20%	38%	83%	N/A	N/A

Note. The percentages represent a gain or loss from the previous school year’s TAPR data to the school year when the intern completed the residency program.

^a – Indicates TAPR data results were masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality.

^b – Indicates that Intern 5, 6, & 7 was the same Intern while the PLC was 3 different grade levels of the same content area.

Next Steps

The findings provided evidence that the principal preparation residency program did make a positive impact within the school district. The pipeline of school leadership was built through the program and the participants in the residency program were being promoted rapidly within the district. The current and former principal interns were helping teachers in the district to grow campus through PLCs and thereby improving student performance. The school district and the university will have to seek new funding to continue the program, as the federal grant they used to establish it has run out. They may be able to do this through the Texas Education Agency, or by finding money in the overall district budget to support the program.

The district administrator who participated in this study valued the job-embedded program as a great benefit to the school district. As described by the district administrator, she implied that transformational leadership through instructional leadership was occurring in their school district. She stated that the applicant pool for assistant principals included a higher caliber of applicants and were being hired before other applicants not serving in the residency program. She also implied that teacher quality was improved through the instructional coaching by the principal intern. On the other hand, she also felt the program could be improved. She said that budget building and management at the campus level was needed to enhance the residency program. The program concentrates heavily on instructional leadership, and she felt that the budget learning component should be expanded.

The district administrator also thought the university should play a role in vetting the principal mentor. The district wanted the same process as the principal interns were

vetted. The principal interns were first vetted by the school district and then by the university, and the district administrator mentioned that the same vetting process exists for the selection of the mentor principal. This way the university could assist in identifying the characteristics of the mentor principal in finding a match to the residency program's requirements and this would assist in eliminating bias from the school district, since they assign and promote the future interns. Another purpose of collaboratively vetting would be to find a fit where the mentor and principal intern would complement each other, which would help them to establish an effective reciprocal mentoring relationship.

Overall, the job-embedded principal preparation residency program was a significant commitment by the school district. This particular school district has invested in their own teachers to lead their campuses in an administrative role. The principal interns have made a positive impact on teacher development and student outcomes. The job-embedded program, unlike a traditional principal preparation program, provides an innovative way of preparing school leaders who are ready to lead immediately upon completion of the program.

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