# Preparing Principals to be Instructional Leaders

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## Abstract

### Purpose

*The purposes of this study are to describe the redesigned instructional leadership program at the University of South Alabama and to evaluate its efficacy in preparing future principals to become instructional leaders.*

### Implications for Research and Practice

*Tomorrow's instructional leaders should practice leadership in school settings. Authentic experiences will enable them to move through the survival stage of leadership preparation and to acquire skills needed to improve students' academic achievement.*

**Key Words:** Principal, Instructional Leadership, Principal Preparation Programs

The principal's job changed in 2001 when The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act put schools on notice that students would have to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies by 2014. Usher (2011) reported that after a decade of collective efforts, more than 91,000 K-12 schools, or approximately 38% of the number of public schools in the United States, failed to reach their AYP benchmarks by 2010" (p. 9).

Nearly two of every five K-12 schools in America are failing and one of the two has missed its annual achievement goals for two or more years. As a result, one school in five "is in some stage of a federally mandated process to improve student achievement" (Hoff, 2008, p. 36).

Efforts to stem the number of failing schools prompted state and local Boards of Education to assess the quality of their school leaders, curriculums, and teaching standards. NCLB's language was unambiguous about using research-based best practices in classrooms and for professional development, but it made no mention of the principal's role in improving student achievement.

## Recruiting and Hiring Principals, Pre-NCLB

Recent literature on school leadership (Drake & Roe, 2003; Owings & Kaplan, 2012; Hoy & Hoy, 2009) asserts that principals are the focus of tremendous expectations. Countless accrediting agencies, consortiums, and educational boards have concluded that *effective* principals are oriented less toward managing *things* and more interested in leading learning communities and facilitating change.

Organizational practices to recruit and hire principals in the past, however, have been fraught with irony. Thelbert L. Drake and William H. Roe (1994) reviewed job advertisements for principal vacancies in the 1980s and 1990s and discovered that they rarely emphasized the managerial side of school leadership.

Instead, they often used vague and effusive phrases, such as "a catalyst for program improvement, an outstanding instructional leader and team builder" (p.27) to attract applicants. The authors concluded that the dichotomy in terminology between *instructional leader* and *school manager* was framed more clearly in Board of Education and central office practices that gave "top priority to handling of management detail, discipline, and evaluation" (p. 27).

**Recruiting and Hiring Instructional Leaders, Post-NCLB: Alabama's Plan**

The number of schools failing to make AYP in Alabama increased between 2001 and 2003. The Governor, active in efforts to bring business and industry to the state, charged the State Board of Education (SBE) to revamp principal-preparation programs to produce graduates with the knowledge and ability to increase student learning.

The SBE, working in concert with the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), revised administrator preparation program standards in 2004 to focus on operational tasks prospective principals must master to become instructional leaders. The SBE also prescribed procedures by which aspiring administrators might gain admission to preparation programs. It wanted to avert the traditional method of self-selection by teachers who sought an advanced degree and its attendant salary increase, but who had no intention of becoming school administrators.

Program applicants were expected to submit a portfolio attesting to their professional experiences, include letters of recommendation, Graduate Record Examination results, and their most recent job performance appraisal. Further, candidates would be interviewed by a panel comprised of district administrators and program faculty. The extra effort required to create a portfolio and undergo an intensive, structured interview had an immediate impact on program enrollment. Five years after its inception, the process has yielded a 79% admission rate, but with far fewer applicants.

**A Case Study: Results at the University of South Alabama**

Instructional Leadership faculty in the College of Education at the University of South Alabama began joint planning to satisfy new program requirements in 2005 with the cooperation of local school district representatives. The cooperative framework included:

- Memorandums of Agreement (MOA) signed by the College's Dean and district superintendents. The MOA enumerated each agency's responsibilities to plan, implement, and evaluate program requirements from receipt of applications to graduation and certification. Presently, seven of eleven district superintendents in the College's service area have signed the document;
- The capstone experience of the new program would be a full-semester assignment in local schools to enable aspiring administrators to practice leadership skills and to acquire a sense of the pace effective principals sustain in their work. This effort was funded by superintendents who were willing to pay for a substitute teacher for the semester. Residents divided their time equally among elementary, middle, and high school campuses in six-week rotations.
- Joint selection of applicants to the new program;
- Mentor training for principals who would supervise residents during assignments in local schools. Training was conducted during the summer for principals identified as being most effective at their jobs.

*Findings*

Evaluating component of the program to ensure its congruence with design was important. Mentor principals were asked to supervise and evaluate residents' leadership skills; residents evaluated the program's rigor, and leadership faculty sought assurances that the curriculum had moved from training principals to be *managers* to preparing them to prepare *instructional leaders*.

Mentor principals were asked to respond to a six-item survey that used a four-point rating scale to depict their perceptions of key program elements. Satisfaction with the residency (mean score of 3.89 of 4.00 points) is reflected in their responses to question number 6 in Table 1.

**Table 1: Mentor Principals' Evaluations of the Redesigned Instructional Leadership Program**

1=unacceptable, 2=acceptable, 3=area of strength, improvement needed,
4=area of strength, no improvement needed, 5=not applicable

| Statement | Mean score |
|---|---|
| 1. My orientation session to the program was helpful. I left the meeting at USA with a reasonably clear idea of my responsibility as a mentor. | 3.87 |
| 2. Program requirements (knowledge and ability statements) were clear. | 3.96 |
| 3. I met with my resident often enough to evaluate his/her performance while he/she was assigned to my school. | 3.96 |
| 4. I was satisfied with the frequency of visits to my school by the USA program supervisor. | 3.91 |
| 5. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) seems to be a helpful formative assessment of Resident performance. | 3.81 |
| 6. My assessment of the residency? | 3.89 |

Note: $N = 65$

Program faculty visited residents during their capstone experience to discuss assignments they had been given and their perceptions about leadership. Additionally, residents returned to the College to meet with faculty at the end of the semester to evaluate the residency. Results are included in Table 2.

**Table 2: Student Cohort Evaluation of the Redesigned Instructional Leadership Program**

1= Not at all, 2 = Some what, but an area of weakness, 3= An area of strength, but needs improvement, 4 = An area of strength, no change needed

| Statement | Mean scor |
|---|---|
| 1. My orientation to the residency was helpful. | 3.42 |
| 2. Classes prior to my residency gave me a good foundation for instructional leadership. | 3.50 |
| 3. My administrators had reasonable knowledge of what I was supposed to accomplish during my residency. | 3.25 |
| 4. I received helpful feedback from my mentor principals about my performance during my residency. | 3.42 |
| 5. I was given opportunities to perform leadership tasks during my residency. | 3.75 |
| 6. USA program faculty visited me often enough during my residency. | 3.92 |
| 7. The Leadership Practices Inventory was used as a formative assessment of my leadership behavior during my residency. | 3.92 |
| 8. I was supported by my school district during my residency (substitutes, payroll, etc.) | 3.58 |

Note: $N = 45$

A discrepancy between the mean score on mentor-principals' surveys for statement three (Table 1) and the mean score for residents' responses to statement four  (Table 2) warrants further investigation.  The variance between the scores is attributable  to the accelerated work pace principals sustain.  Residents wanted more interaction with mentors to discuss their performance, but principals believed they gave residents an adequate amount of time and guidance.

Additionally, each resident was evaluated with the Leadership Practices Inventory® (LPI), a series of on line surveys that includes a self-assessment and feedback from as many as five observers and a mentor principal.  Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner created the LPI in 2003 to "dispel two popular myths about leadership: First, that leadership is an innate quality people are born with, and second, that only a select few can lead successfully" (p.3).  The authors "concentrated on people in middle management whose daily lives were on the front line, leading community and school projects, managing departments, running programs, starting small businesses, opening new sales territories, and expanding product lines" (p. 3).

Kouzes and Posner identified Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® that include Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart to support their belief that "Leadership has absolutely nothing to do with your position or status and *everything* to do with your *behavior*; Leadership is *an observable set of skills and abilities* that both experienced and novice leaders can use to turn challenging opportunities into remarkable successes" (p. 3-4).

Figure1 depicts composite LPI data for 45 Instructional Leadership students in the first six cohort groups between 2007 and 2010.  Interestingly, residents' self-efficacy increased between the first and second administrations of the LPI during the capstone experience.   The initial LPI was administered during the first three weeks of the residency and again within two weeks of its conclusion.

**Figure 1.  Residents' Perceptions of their Growth in Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership during a One-Semester Practicum**
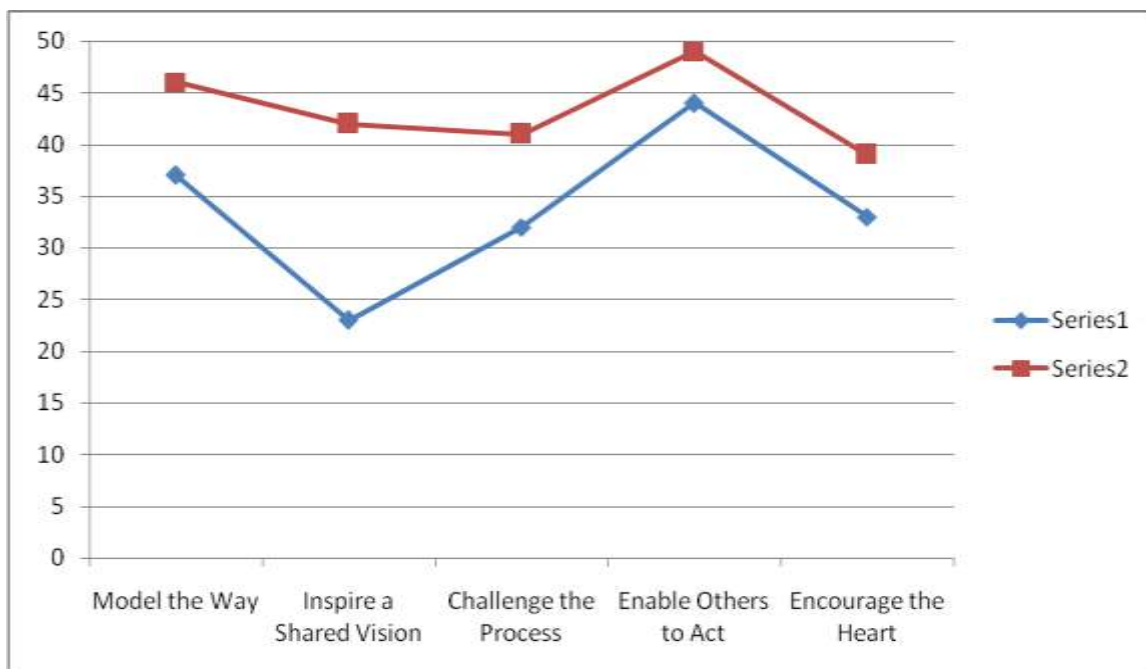


Note. $N = 39$

Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the statistical significance        ($p \leq .05$) of the instructional leadership program on residents' scores for each of  the LPI's five functions.  The variance between each of five pairs of data points was statistically significant.

Table 3 reflects mean differences in residents' scores for each practice; the differences are reported with a 95% confidence interval that defines the range of acceptable scores.

Additionally, Cohen's D describes differences in the effect size between mean scores for each resident's results. Gray and Lewis (2011) foundthat "multiple assessments helped to guide residents through leadership experiences" (p. 15). The ALSDE, however, requires anyone seeking principal licensure to pass a norm-referenced, discipline-based PRAXIS-II examination. Forty three of forty five residents have passed the examination and are eligible for administrative certification.

**Table 3: Leadership Practices Inventory Results for Selected Residents in USA's Redesigned Instructional Leadership Program**

| Practice | Pretest Mean | Pretest SD | Posttest Mean | Posttest SD | t (57) | P Two-tailed | Mean Difference | Cohen's D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model the Way | 47.20 | 6.16 | 50.65 | 6.13 | 3.29 | .003 | 3.44 | .79 |
| Inspire the Vision | 42.17 | 9.03 | 47.83 | 6.46 | 3.14 | .005 | 5.65 | .88 |
| Challenge the Process | 43.17 | 8.96 | 47.35 | 7.94 | 2.55 | .018 | 4.17 | .66 |
| Enable Others to Act | 49.22 | 5.23 | 51.74 | 56.00 | 2.26 | .033 | 4.83 | .68 |
| Encourage the Heart | 46.39 | 7.32 | 49.87 | 6.82 | 2.49 | .021 | 3.48 | .67 |
| LPI Summative | 45.63 | 6.71 | 49.49 | 6.06 | 2.95 | .007 | 3.85 | .81 |

Note: *N* = 39

**What Can New Principals Expect?**

The principal's job is among the most challenging positions in a school system. Only one leader is assigned to each campus. The knowledge and abilities administrators need for success are different from the traits the promote teacher efficacy.

USA residents made strides in understanding an instructional leader's role during a one-semester internship and through exposure to the pace, intensity, and accountability that principals face every day. Their experiences will help them through the first days and weeks of a administrative assignment.

New principals, however, are confronted by contextual realities for which no amount of experience can prepare them. Thomas Hoerr (2011), head of the New City School in St. Louis, Missouri, cautioned veteran and novice principals that "The first reality is that education and educators today are subject to harsh criticism" (p. 88). Further, management technology has increased administrators' dependence on e-mails, spread sheets, and the Internet. Hoerr warns that these innocuous tools can absorb a principal's time to the point that "we could spend our day interacting with a computer screen" (p. 88) and forget the importance of the people in our schools.

Joanne Rooney (2000), Co-Director of the Midwest Principals' Center in Illinois, offered practical tips to beginning principals, many of whom will feel overwhelmed in their job. She suggested that they "respect the past with its heroes, heroines, icons, and rituals; meet each teacher and department chair; locate the power; keep the central office informed; find friends and mentors among colleagues; take care of yourself and reflect on your leadership; continue to learn, and pick your battles" (p. 77).

**Summary**

Evidence gathered through multiple assessments, site visits by USA faculty, feedback from district central office staffs, residents' reflections, mentor principals' evaluations, the LPI, and the PRAXIS II are conclusive. The most effective way to train instructional leaders is through extended assignments in schools where they will share the intensity of the principal's day and the complexities and rewards of leadership that attend to working with students, teachers, and the school's community.

The USA's redesigned program included authentic assessments of leadership behaviors and guided residents through *survival,* the initial stage of organizational socialization. A paradigm shift in principal-preparation programs from training building *managers* to empowering instructional *leaders* will foster improved teaching and increased student achievement.

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