Motivational Factors for School Leaders: A Closer Look at the Perspectives of Current School Leaders from Four Louisiana School Districts

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Abstract

The material discussed in this paper is based on research findings from a study conducted in 2009 which gathered data from four Louisiana school districts (Caddo, Lafayette, Rapides and the Recovery School District) addressing the working conditions of educational leaders. The study included variables such as ongoing support (from districts, universities, and the state legislature), motivational factors which lead teachers into educational leadership certification programs, and what factors play a part in remaining in, or leaving the principalship. The goal of this study was to determine the working conditions in Louisiana schools that can be used to influence district and state policies for the ultimate improvement of student achievement.

Keywords: Principal, motivation, leadership, education

1. Introduction

The scarcity of well-prepared educational leaders is an issue often discussed in K-12 schools, school district offices, state departments of education, and university settings across the country (Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; McCreight, 2001). However, at least one study (Roza, 2003) found that, in spite of pervasive conversations about a widespread shortage of principals, shortages may more of a perception than a major concern. The greater issue may be the need for a new kind of leader – one who understands the unique challenges of educating the new generation student in an age of accountability. This type of leader does not rely solely on a managerial skill set. He or she must be a visionary, collaborative leader. However, this type of leadership can only exist if it is supported.

1.1 Background of the Study

The researchers attempted to identify conditions that support educational leaders through a research project commissioned in 2009 by the Louisiana Board of Regents and funded by the Wallace Foundation. The study focused on four school districts in Louisiana selected by the Board of Regents. Selected districts represented four distinct geographical portions of the state – northwest, south central, central, and southeast Louisiana.

1.2 Purpose, Goal, and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to gather data to identify conditions that support educational leaders as they strive to increase the achievement of students in four school districts in Louisiana. The goal was to gather data to determine what specific conditions are needed to support effective educational leaders in Louisiana in their ongoing mission of increasing student achievement.

This paper focuses upon two of the four objectives for this research project:
1. To determine what encourages, discourages and motivates individuals to pursue educational leadership certification.
2. To determine what motivates effective leaders to remain within the profession.

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The following research questions guided this study:

1. What encourages, discourages and motivates individuals to pursue educational leadership certification to attain principal/central office positions?
2. What motivates effective leaders to remain within the profession, and what motivates effective leaders to work in the most challenging schools?

1.3 Limitations of the Study

This study measured the responses of school leaders in four Louisiana school districts with regard to their attitudes about working conditions for school leaders in their school district. A limitation to the study can be attributed to respondent bias as a result of the respondents possibly inflating their responses in order to cast a more favorable view on the working conditions in their school (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996). Another limitation of the study results from the lack of sufficient responses to the pilot survey to be able to establish internal validity and reliability for the survey instrument.

1.4 Selection of Districts and Participants

The study focused on four school districts identified by the Louisiana Board of Regents: Caddo Parish Public School System, Lafayette Parish Public School System, Rapides Parish Public School System, and the Recovery School District. By virtue of holding such positions, it was assumed that all participants hold at least one of the following endorsements: Provisional Principal, Principal, Supervisor of Instruction (old), or Educational Leader – Level 1 or 2 (new).

1.4.1 Caddo Parish

The Caddo Parish Public School System has 74 schools with over 43,000 students. Slightly more than 60% of the students in Caddo Parish qualify for free or reduced lunch. During the 2006-07 school year, there were 3,362 faculty members in Caddo. In 2006-2007, three of the four schools identified in the state as five star schools were in Caddo Parish. However, during this same year, Caddo had 12 schools identified as *Academically Unacceptable* (Louisiana Department of Education Website, 2009). Of the 75 supervisors and administrators issued the Working Conditions Survey in Caddo Parish Public Schools, 24 submitted completed surveys.

1.4.2 Lafayette Parish

State accountability documents for 2006-07 show that Lafayette Parish Public Schools are comprised of 44 schools with an enrollment of 30,255 (Louisiana Department of Education Website, 2009). Approximately 51% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. There were 2,376 faculty employed in 2006 and only one Lafayette Parish School was deemed *Academically Unacceptable*. Of the 115 educational leaders asked to participate in the survey, a total of 60 replied with completed surveys.

1.4.3 Rapides Parish

Rapides Parish Public School System showed 52 public schools with an enrollment of 23,763 in the 2006-07 School Report Card (Louisiana Department of Education Website, 2009). Nearly 65% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced price lunch. Three schools were labeled *Academically Unacceptable* in 2006-07. Of the 50 applicants issued the Working Conditions Survey, 20 educational leaders responded.

1.4.4 Recovery School District

The Recovery School District (RSD) was created by the Louisiana Legislature in 2003 in an effort to transform unsuccessful schools into schools which demonstrate student achievement. These schools are administered by the Louisiana Department of Education. For the 2008-09 school year, the RSD operated 33 traditional schools and 33 charter schools, with the bulk of the schools located in Orleans Parish. The RSD has four schools in East Baton Rouge Parish and one in Pointe Coupee Parish. Ten additional schools will be added to the district during the 2009-10 school year. Two of these schools are in Caddo Parish and eight schools from East Baton Rouge Parish will join the RSC . Twenty-one of the 61 educational leaders from the RSD completed the survey.

1.5 Data Collection

A total of 125 supervisors/ administrators responded to an electronic survey (See Appendix A). In addition to collecting demographic data, there were five survey items which addressed the following questions:

1. What encourages, discourages, and motivates individuals to pursue educational leadership certification?

2. What motivates effective leaders to remain within the profession?

2. Findings

Comparisons were made between responses from the various demographic groups in four Louisiana school districts identified through the survey to determine what differences, if any, existed that could be attributed to those demographic groups.

The Working Conditions Survey, developed by the researchers for this project, was used to gather data from the Principals and Educational Leaders in the four school districts participating in the study regarding which motivators encouraged them to become school leaders, which motivators influenced them to remain in school leadership positions, and which factors discouraged them from becoming school leaders. The respondents were also asked to indicate their current level of satisfaction with their school leadership position and what professional services their school district, universities, and the state could provide that would provide a greater level of support to new school leaders. The survey was divided into two sections that gathered demographic data followed by the eight core questions related to the research questions listed above. A final open-ended question allowed respondents to provide any additional comments they wished to make concerning working conditions for school leaders in Louisiana.

2.1 Discussion of Results

2.1.1 Research Question 1

What encourages, discourages, and motivates individuals to pursue educational leadership certification to attain principal/central office positions? Following is a discussion of the survey items addressing this research question.

2.1.2 Survey Question 10: *Select the three most important motivational factors which contributed to your decision to pursue educational leadership certification in order to obtain employment as a school leader/administrator.*

Frequency of responses

Although not statistically significant, the following frequency of responses was found for this question:

- 104 respondents selected the response: *Desired to have a larger impact on student success;*
- 88 respondents selected the response: *Belief in personal organizational/ leadership skills;*
- 73 respondents selected the response: *Needed a new challenge;*
- 48 respondents selected the response: *Potential for higher earnings;*
- 14 respondents selected the response: *Ready to leave the classroom;*
- Seven respondents selected the response: *Desired the power/prestige associated with a leadership/administrative position;* and
- 18 respondents selected the response: *Other* and supplied a response other than the provided list of responses.

Significant statistical findings

There were four significant findings for this survey item. First, the potential for higher earnings was rated significantly higher by respondents who were somewhat satisfied than by those who were very satisfied with their school leadership position. Second, respondents who worked in multiple school settings ranked the power and prestige of their position significantly higher than did respondents working in urban schools, rural schools, or the central office. Third, both respondents from schools with less than 50% of their students receiving free or reduced price lunch and respondents from schools with 51-75% of their students receiving free or reduced price lunch reported the potential for higher earnings as a motivator at a significantly higher rate than did respondents in schools with 76-100% of their students receiving free or reduced price lunch. Fourth, both respondents from schools with 76-100% of their students receiving free or reduced price lunch and respondents from schools where less than 50% of their students receive free or reduced price lunch reported the need for a new challenge at significantly higher rates than did respondents from schools with 51-75% of their students receiving free or reduced price lunch.

2.1.3 Survey Question 11: *Select the three most important motivational factors which discouraged you from seeking educational leadership certification and obtaining employment as a school leader/administrator.*

Frequency of responses

Although not statistically significant, the frequency of responses for the total group of 125 respondents was:

- 68 respondents selected: *School board politics;*
- 63 respondents selected: *Political environment of the school community*;
- 57 respondents selected: *Maintaining a balance between work and personal life;*
- 50 respondents selected: *Accountability demands placed on school leaders;*
- 34 respondents selected: *Time commitment required by the job;*
- 31 respondents selected: *Social isolation of school leadership;*
- 12 respondents selected: *Investment of time, money, and effort in fulfilling certification requirements;* and
- 12 respondents selected: *Other* and supplied a response other than the ones listed.

Significant statistical findings

This survey question produced a number of significant results:

- Caucasians rated maintaining a balance between work and personal life as a discouraging factor at a significantly higher rate than did African-Americans.
- African-Americans rated lack of support from the central office as a discouraging factor significantly higher than did Caucasians.
- Years of service also was a factor in maintaining a balance between work and personal life with respondents having 11 years of service or more rating this item significantly higher than did those respondents with 3-5 years of service.
- School leaders working in schools with less than 50% of students receiving free or reduced price lunch rated school board politics as a discouraging factor at a significantly higher rate than did those school leaders working in schools where 51-75% of students receive free or reduced price lunch.
- Respondents from Caddo Parish selected accountability demands placed on school leaders at a significantly higher rate than did respondents from the Recovery School District.

Although the following are not considered significant, it is worth noting that:

- Respondents with 6-10 years experience selected the political environment of the school community at a higher rate than did those respondents with 2 years or less experience.
- Respondents with 11 or more years experience selected the amount of time, money, and effort to obtain certification at a higher rate than did those respondents with 3-5 years experience.
- Those respondents with the new certification type reported lack of support from the central office as a discouraging factor more often than those with the old certification type.

2.1.4 Survey Question 12: *What is your overall level of satisfaction with your current school leadership/Administrative position?*

*S*even respondents (5% of the total) reported being somewhat dissatisfied with their current position, while four respondents (3% of the total) reported being very dissatisfied with their current position. Over half the respondents (54%) reported being very satisfied with their current position and 38% reported being somewhat satisfied with their current position.

2.2 Research Question 3

What motivates effective leaders to remain within the profession, and what motivates effective leaders to work in the most challenging schools?

In the survey instrument, this research question was divided into two separate survey questions. In each survey question, the respondents were asked to select up to three responses from a list of possible responses.

2.2.1 Survey Question 14: *What motivates effective school leaders to remain in the profession?*

Frequency of responses

Although not statistically significant, the frequency of responses for the total group of 125 respondents was:

- 111 respondents chose: *Personal belief in the value of the work performed.*
- 108 respondents chose: *The continued ability to positively affect students' lives and academic performance.*
- 65 respondents chose: *Belief that school stakeholders value the work performed.*
- 39 respondents chose: *Decent salaries with potential for increased earnings.*
- 14 respondents chose: *Stepping stone for career progression.*
- 2 respondents chose: *Status and prestige in the community associated with the position.*
- 7 respondents chose: *Other* and provided a response other than the ones provided.

Significant statistical findings

This question yielded the only significant *t*-test in the study. Women reported being motivated to remain in their positions at a significantly higher rate than men based on a personal belief in the value of the work performed.

ANOVA analyses produced several other significant findings. Respondents from Lafayette Parish rated stepping stone for career progression significantly higher than respondents from either Rapides Parish or the Recovery School District. In addition, considering the stepping stone for career progression variable, school leaders in schools with less than 50% of students receiving free or reduced price lunch rated this factor significantly higher than school leaders in schools with 76-100% of students receiving free or reduced price lunch. Finally, with regard to the decent salaries with potential for increased earnings variable, the researchers found three significant results: (1) respondents from Lafayette Parish rated this factor significantly higher than respondents from the Recovery School District; (2) school leaders located in the central/district office rated this factor significantly higher than school leaders located in either urban or rural schools; and (3) respondents who reported being somewhat satisfied with their current position rated this factor significantly higher that respondents who reported being very satisfied with their current position.

2.2.2 Survey Question 15: *What motivates school leaders to work in the most challenging schools?*

Frequency of responses

Although not statistically significant, the frequency of responses for the total group of 125 respondents was:

- 109 respondents selected: *Dedication to the student population the school serves.*
- 92 respondents selected: *The challenge of improving academic performance.*
- 90 respondents selected: *Dedication to the profession.*
- 37 respondents selected: *Belief or membership in the community the school serves.*
- 5 respondents selected: *Necessary step for career progression.*
- 3 respondents selected: *Other* and provided a response other than the ones listed.

Significant statistical findings

The only significant finding for this question was that educational leaders who work in schools where 51-75% of students receive free or reduced price lunch rated dedication to the student population the school serves significantly higher than those educational leaders who work in schools where less than 50% of students receive free or reduced price lunch. However, there were three findings that were close to significance and are worth noting here: (1) the challenge of improving academic performance was rated higher by respondents with the new educational leadership certification type than by respondents with the old certification type; (2) dedication to the student population the school serves was rated higher by respondents from the Recovery School District than by respondents from Lafayette Parish; and (3) dedication to the profession was rated higher by school leaders with 6-10 years or service than by school leaders with 3-5 years of service.

3. Conclusions

It became apparent to the researchers that the school leaders who participated in this study form a fairly homogenous group who tend to think about the working conditions of their jobs in much the same way. The statistical analysis of the survey data yielded fewer significant differences between sub-groups than were anticipated. The relative lack of significant differences in responses among sub-groups may result from several factors:

- Respondent bias, as noted in the limitations of the study, whether conscious or unconscious, is a well-known limitation of self-reporting survey research (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996) and may have caused inflated responses from each sub-group.
- The sample group, school leaders from four Louisiana school districts, may be too narrow in scope and limited to a population that is likely to think along similar lines. Inclusion of a more diverse group of school leaders may have diluted this effect.

3.1 Recommendations

Recommendations for future study that should be considered include:

- Replicative studies utilizing a larger population of school leaders to determine if more extensive significant differences exist between population sub-groups.
- Replicative studies utilizing a more diverse population of school leaders, such as the inclusion of private school leaders and more charter school leaders to determine if significant differences exist between these populations.
- Replicative studies that include salaries and age as variables to determine if they cause significant differences among sub-groups.

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