

Promoting the Principalship A Maine Principals' Association White Paper

Introduction

The Maine Principals' Association Board of Directors (formerly the Joint Professional and Interscholastic Executive Committees) commissioned an Ad Hoc Committee to Promote the Principalship. The committee began its work in April of 2004 and met nine times over the next year, usually in full day sessions. While there was considerable experience and expertise on the committee, it was important to meet with others who had specific knowledge and information. Those interviewed included the executive director of the superintendent's association, the MPA staff person most responsible for professional development, a young teacher and mother certified as an administrator but not willing to impact her family by pursuing a principalship, a group of five superintendents, representatives from two administrator preparation programs, two first year principals, and a group of six veteran principals who have moved from one grade level (elementary, middle or secondary) to another.

The ad hoc committee was charged with determining:

- Recruitment issues
- Retention issues
- Can the principalship be modified to make it more attractive?
- Can the MPA and others positively affect these issues?

Their findings and recommendations follow.

Research

In recent years, there has been considerable research into factors which contribute to a perceived shortage of principals nationwide. Studies by the national principals' associations (1998), Institute for Educational Leadership (2000), and Public Agenda (2001), cited concern among school leaders about attraction and retention of high quality principals across the nation. In Maine, the problem of finding and keeping qualified school leaders for principalships is pronounced and has generated significant research. Several studies dealing with principal supply and demand have resulted in alarming conclusions. The Maine Leadership Consortium's report on their 1999 Select Seminar on Administrative Supply and Demand stated that the

major issues that surfaced [regarding administrative supply and demand] were long hours, stress, lack of suitable compensation and relationship issues. However, panel participants also indicated their own conviction that their roles were deeply satisfying and that while defining problems, they want to avoid discouraging new administrators (p. 8).

Anne Marie Read (1998) found that fragmented time, tasks, and relationships discouraged school leaders and potential school leaders. In a similar vein, Regina Campbell (2001), a working Maine superintendent, tackled the problem of diminishing numbers of superintendent candidates. She found that while most superintendents found their jobs satisfying, a more realistic view of the superintendency would encourage more applicants. Don Buckingham (2004), an active Maine principal, found statistical correlations among perceived stress of principals and the number of hours on the job and the perception of having too much work to handle. While most principals would choose to be principals again, those who reported high work hours and high stress would do so in fewer numbers. Principals who reported high stress worked, on average, a work week that was almost a full day (6.7 hours) longer than those who reported lower stress. The 1999 Maine School Administrative Supply Report (Downs, 1999) found a third of Maine principals cited too many time demands as a characteristic of the job. Downs, too, noted there were mixed views on job satisfaction. According to the study, those views, when articulated, had a negative impact on recruiting new administrators.

In their study of Maine principals, Donaldson and Hausman (1997) found that principals reported high levels of self-efficacy. They also found that principals reported little ability to balance personal and professional lives. The authors pointed the way to future research “to examine the interaction of personal and professional lives” (p. 17), including obligations to others outside the profession, and the connection of time to the principalship. Using the same data, Donaldson and Hausman (1998) subsequently wrote:

At a time of widespread consternation about the supply and survival of effective school principals, we were surprised that...principals considered themselves moderately to very successful. As expected, they reported doing it all; unexpectedly, they felt clear about expectations of them in a wide array of activities and felt successful at all of them....Maine principals, as well, revealed a puzzling disconnect between feelings of success and their own professional and personal well being (pp. 13-14).

As the pressures on principals increase with growing emphasis on public accountability for high stakes testing, greater attention to economic and cultural diversity, school violence, the factors of too much time on the job, the complexity of the work, and the sacrifices to family and personal time make it hard for some principals to remain in the profession. Witnessing principals struggling with these challenges may well be enough to discourage prospective principals from applying for these important leadership roles.

Findings

The ad hoc committee met with principals, superintendents, teachers, and university instructors. The discussions were both rich and powerful and noted the alarming disconnect between the number of building administrators approaching retirement and

the shortage of teachers wanting or willing to become principals, even though often qualified, degreed and certified. Through their twelve month process the committee developed beliefs as to why many of those teachers are not interested or willing. Perhaps more importantly, they developed strategies for the Maine Principals' Association, administrator preparation programs, state government, veteran principals, aspiring principals, superintendents, school boards and the public to address these issues.

In the words of one principal, "It's the package, not the individual issues." No single reason evolved as to why this generation of teachers does not aspire to the principalship in sufficient numbers. Principals reported that, when approached, teachers with great potential often replied "I see what you do. There is no way I would subject myself to that."

From both research and conversation, four major concerns rose above all others. Time, stress, expectations and financial considerations consistently topped every list.

Time is a huge factor. Practicing principals reported working 60, 70, and even 80 hours some weeks. The school day is a fulltime job. Adding additional hours per day for committee meetings, athletic and activities events, school board meetings, etc., saps energy and enthusiasm and often creates personal relationship issues at home. Even daytime meetings, though more convenient, can force principals to spend evenings and weekends "clearing the desk." Those who are principals feel trapped by time and those with potential to be administrators don't wish to become trapped.

Stress from the pressures of the principalship is an issue for principals as well as for those who might aspire to the position. There are many different stress factors, usually the result of unrealistic expectations either external or self induced. Stress can be a good motivator to a point but should not interfere with the ability to do the job effectively.

The third major issue is one of expectations. There are expectations placed on the principal by students, parents, staff, superintendents, school boards and communities. Unfortunately, there is often little agreement among and within those constituencies as to what the expectations are. Add the expectations that the principal holds for him/herself and we create a recipe for disaster. In trying to please everyone we satisfy no one including ourselves.

Salary is an issue but benefits may be as important. Principals feel "under appreciated" when salaries, health insurance benefits, etc., do not represent an increased work year prorated at a minimum to the salary and benefits of veteran teachers. Inadequate Maine state retirement benefits and health insurance coverage are detriments to principals entering or remaining in the profession.

Many have argued that if time and expectations were appropriately addressed, stress and finances might become of less concern. Accordingly, many of the recommendations found later in this document deal with time and expectations.

It is generally agreed that the principal is the single, most important individual in successful schools. Principals agreed that the superintendent is usually the single most important factor in determining the success of a principal. With strong support from superintendents, good principals become great ones. With a lack of support, good principals become frustrated and either leave their school, wait for the superintendent to move on, or consider early retirement. School boards and the public need to be better informed regarding the difficult work of principals and the value of finding and keeping a good one. Successful superintendents do this on a regular basis and often attract the best principals because of it.

Generally, principals feel prepared for the theoretical aspects of leadership. If unprepared, it is usually about the reality of the job. Principals report that they lack self-advocacy skills when negotiating or working with superintendents and boards. They lack training in the issues of time and stress. Occasionally they question whether some administrator preparation instructors understand the “current reality” of today’s schools and principals.

Principals report that they often find it difficult to leave their school building for professional development or personal needs. They “feel guilty” if seen away from the school during school hours. They often do not advocate for their professional development needs, and/or do not feel supported by the superintendent and school board. Principals admit that, often, they attempt to do everything themselves and do not prepare people and procedures for the principal’s legitimate absence from the building.

Finally, professional and personal life are often at odds. Time commitments can force a lack of attention to family and personal life. Many spoke of the difficulties if a spouse or partner has a similar time commitment in his/her job. Often one of the two has to be willing to accept a reduced career role in order to provide personal and family balance.

Recommendations

Those who are active principals must help promote the principalship. They must encourage outstanding teachers to become administrators and should take great pride in those who do. Principals should realistically share the challenges and rewards of their job, but must continually be open and positive about what they do. Assistant principals must be supported and given opportunities to grow into the principalship. Principals must be committed to negotiating the balance of professional duty and personal time, for themselves as well as those who will follow them.

It is important to be bold and to challenge the MPA as well as others to address these issues. It is only fair to include all who might play a role in providing positive solutions to these issues. Accordingly, these suggestions are made with the proper respect for the difficult responsibilities of all parties.

There should be a mutual understanding between the principal and superintendent concerning the time necessary to meet the professional responsibilities of the job.

Adjustments to the workday and year should be made in order to offset extended days and evenings spent with school activities, board and other meetings, committee responsibilities, etc. Reasonable expectations should be set regarding full attendance at school board meetings. All concerned should recognize that there will be times when the principal may need to leave the building for professional or personal reasons.

Principals have ever-changing professional development needs. The superintendent and school board should be willing to provide time and financial support for district, regional, state, and national professional development on a regular basis. There should be in place, or an expressed willingness to provide, a formal induction system including financial support for the mentoring process.

The success of a principal clearly depends upon the support and counsel of the superintendent. Ideally, the superintendent directs the Board in policy decisions and the principal is given the opportunity to lead the school. Micro-management by the superintendent or board should never be the reason for an unsuccessful principal. Superintendents and boards must require staff and parents to go through the principal, not around him/her. Principals should be encouraged to be risk takers toward school improvement. Principals and superintendents must work in a mutually supportive manner with neither “surprising” the other.

Principalship candidates, the superintendent and the school board are all responsible for shared, clearly defined expectations when an administrator is hired. There should be a job description defining building as well as any district-wide responsibilities. If expectations are not clear and measurable, no one will know (or agree) if expectations have been met. Expectations can then be assessed more fairly by all concerned. The culture of the community must be a clear match with the skills, beliefs, and personality of the administrator.

There should be a discussion about the superintendent and board expectations regarding two aspects of the principalship: educational leader and building manager. Discussions should include priorities and human and other resources available to meet both areas of responsibility.

Salary and benefits should, at a minimum, proportionally reflect the increased responsibility as well as the number and length of days in the administrator’s contract as compared to the top of the teacher salary scale. Recognizing the important services provided by professional education associations, the district should pay full dues for membership in state and national associations. Districts should show support for and confidence in both newly hired and veteran principals by awarding multiyear contracts.

State government should address inadequacies in state retirement and health insurance benefits for retirees. Many good teachers, principals, and superintendents leave the profession or, worse, refuse to become educators because of these inadequacies.

The Maine Principals' Association and administrator preparation programs share many common opportunities to prepare aspiring administrators and to support those presently serving as active principals. Opportunities need to be provided for professional development resulting in alternate pathways to certification. Training needs to be offered around issues of time and stress management. Formal programs for a three to five year induction process must be developed with a quality, funded, mentoring program in place and available to every new principal. The MPA and administrator preparation programs should work to provide the best of both theory and reality to aspiring principals in all regions of the state. More consideration must be given to providing professional development appropriate to the different phases of a principal's career. At least three phases meeting the needs of induction, continued growth, and veteran principals should be considered. Experienced principals, together with superintendents and boards, should give increased consideration to the value of sabbaticals.

For those many principals who lead their students, staff, and communities to success, there is no better career! The variables described in this report lead to a broad list of issues not easily solved by any one of us. There is much to be done by all parties but all recommendations in this report are not only possible but doable. All concerned must accept the challenge of ensuring that, within five years, every principal opening will result in a large number of quality, qualified applicants from which to select the principal who is just right for that school and community.

Selected Bibliography

Buckingham, D. (2004) Associations among stress, work overload, role conflict, and self-efficacy in Maine principals. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maine, Orono.

Campbell, R. (2001). Aspiring to the superintendency: Factors that influence the decision. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maine, Orono.

Donaldson, G. A., Buckingham, D. A., & Coladarci, T. (2003). The Maine principal study: Stability and change among Maine principals, 1997-2001. Orono: University of Maine College of Education and Human Development, and the Penquis Superintendents' Association.

Donaldson, G. A. & Hausman, C. S. (1997). Maine principals and their worklives: A study of the Maine school principalship. Orono: University of Maine College of Education and Human Development

Donaldson, G. A. & Hausman, C. S. (1998). What makes principals feel successful? Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Education Administration, St. Louis.

Downs, G. (1999). 1999 Maine school administrative supply report. Orono: Center for Research and Evaluation.

Educational Research Service. (1998). Is there a shortage of qualified applicants for the principalship? An exploratory study for the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Washington, DC.

Farkas, S., Johnson, J., Duffett, A., & Foleno, T. (2001). Trying to stay ahead of the game: Superintendents and principals talk about school leadership. New York: Public Agenda.

Maine Leadership Consortium. (1999). Administrator supply and demand: Finding solutions: Select seminar report. Orono, ME: Maine Leadership Consortium.

Leadership for Student Learning: Reinventing the Principalship. (2000). Washington DC: institute of Educational Leadership, Inc.

Read, A. (1998). Conversation on the status of women school leaders in Maine: It doesn't just concern women anymore. Orono, ME: Maine Leadership Consortium.

Read, A. (2000). What if no one wants the job of school leader? Journal of Maine Education, 16 (1), 16-20.

wddata\adhoc\principalship\whitepaper

Don Buckingham, Sedgwick Elementary School
Tom Jandreau, Bucksport Middle School
Donna Lisnik, Presque Isle High School
Pat Palmer, Freeport (Co-Chair)
Howie Ryder, Lincoln Academy (Co-Chair)
Jane Wallace Stevens, Boothbay Region Elementary School
Carol Weeks, Biddeford Middle School
Rod Wright, Livermore Falls High School
Richard Durost, MPA Staff

If you wish to comment, contact the MPA at mpa@mpa.cc.