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Evaluation of School Principals: Arizona Superintendents’ Perspective

This article presents the results of the Arizona Statewide Superintendents’ Survey regarding the evaluation of school principals. Arizona Revised Statute 15-353 delineates the responsibilities of principals, which include providing leadership for the school, implementing the goals and the strategic plan of the school, serving as the administrator of the school, and distributing a parental satisfaction survey to the parent of every child enrolled at the school. There are state performance standards, the Arizona Standards for School Administrators (ADE, 2010). Arizona law clearly defines the principal’s responsibilities and each governing board is required to establish systems for the evaluation of the performance of principals, but no uniform system is mandated and the evaluation of the performance of principals is ill defined.

Principals are critical to the success of students, teachers and schools. An effective principal creates a culture of learning that (a) advances student learning and engagement, (b) recruits and retains the best teachers, and (c) improves teacher and school performance (NBPTS, 2010). Although student success is the result of many, complex variables, principals play an influential role that has a direct effect on school outcomes (Bottoms, Fry, & Hill, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Sanders & Simpson, 2005). The Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 reinforced the proposition of the original ISLLC Standards that the principal’s primary responsibility is to improve teaching and learning for all children.

It is clear that effective principals are essential to effective schools. Their development and effectiveness depends on consistent and constructive evaluation and principal evaluation brings many benefits (Peterson, 1991). For example, it encourages communication within organizations, facilitates mutual goal setting by principals and superintendents, sensitizes evaluators to principals’ needs, and motivates them to improve (Weiss, 1989).

Additionally, principal evaluation can inform formative and/or summative performance appraisals. Formative evaluation is relatively informal and intended to help principals modify and strengthen their practice. The purpose of formative evaluation is to ensure that the goals of the organization are being achieved and that standards are being met, to improve performance and, if appropriate, to remediate problem areas (Weston, Mc Alpine, and Bordonaro, 1995). Summative evaluation is generally more structured, quantitative, and used to measure and document the level of the principals’ success and to make some sort of judgment (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008). Typically, summative performance evaluations facilitate decisions regarding compensation or tenure.

Mostly, principals’ evaluations are based on their students’ achievement as measured by their performance on the federally mandated and state implemented standardized tests (Ediger, 2002). However, research suggests that a more effective method preferred by principals is a standards-based system that encompasses many indicators of successful administrative and leadership performance.
beyond students’ scores (Kimball, Milanowski, & McKinney 2009). Ultimately, effective principal evaluation, formative or summative, requires congruence between well-defined standards and performance assessment (Catano & Strong, 2006; Popham, 1993; Rosenberg, 2001).

**Purpose of the Study and Significance**

On March 13, 2010, the Obama administration released its blueprint for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). States are expected to adopt world-class academic standards and to create accountability systems that measure student growth toward meeting the goal that all children graduate and succeed in college (US Department of Education, 2010). The reauthorized ESEA would reward schools for measurable impact on student achievement. “Improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader” (US Department of Education, 2010, p.3) is the number one area of four highlighted to receive attention. States are to develop and implement systems of principal evaluation and support, and to identify effective principals based on student growth and other factors (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 8). Arizona’s Standards for School Administrators are defined clearly, mirror the ISSLC Standards, and are readily available on the state Department of Education website, but information about whether or not the state standards are aligned with principal evaluation or how the standards are used in the evaluation process is scant. The purpose of this study was to explore the structure, process, and criteria used to evaluate Arizona principals.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) How is Arizona principal evaluation structured? (b) What process guides Arizona principal evaluation? (c) What criteria are used to evaluate Arizona principals?

**Method**

In 2007, a database was developed identifying the 218 Arizona State superintendents. A survey, developed using recognized guidelines, was sent to each superintendent (Orlich, 1978; Yin, 2003). Part B of the survey focused on principal evaluation. In the first section of Part B, the superintendents were asked to use a Likert scale to respond to statements related to the structure, process and criteria of the principal evaluations they perform defined as follows:

(a) **structure**: to examine legal or contractual requirements, comfort with the evaluator and whether or not merit pay was a byproduct of the evaluation;

(b) **process**: to review frequency of evaluation and the use of evaluative instruments;

(c) **criteria**: a categorization of what is utilized by the evaluator to determine various aspects of performance.

In the second section of Part B, superintendents were provided a list of factors that may be used by superintendents/supervisors in the evaluation of the principal(s). They were asked to review the list and to identify the five most important items to the superintendent in the principal’s evaluation. Some examples of this list include the following: instructional leadership, student discipline, development of school improvement plan, and student performance measured by AIMS. They were instructed to select only five items and to rank their selections. Finally, they were provided an open-ended option to
comment regarding the evaluation of principals.

After a period of four weeks, a follow-up survey was sent to the superintendents who had not responded. Ultimately, fifty-eight percent of the superintendents responded to the survey totaling 127 respondents. As the intent of Part B of this survey was to gain insight regarding Arizona superintendents’ views on principal evaluation, the response rate was good allowing general conclusions to be drawn.

Results

Characteristics of the Respondents

Of the 127 respondents, 73% were male superintendents. The respondents were 62 (out of 97) Unified (K-12) district superintendents, 14 (out of 15) High School (9-12) superintendents, 47 (out of 106) Elementary (K-8) superintendents, and four respondents did not indicate district type. A further examination of the respondents’ demographic characteristics revealed that nearly half had six or more years experience as a superintendent of schools, but approximately three-quarters had five years or less experience in their current position indicating the high degree of mobility school superintendents tend to experience (see Table 1, for indicators of respondents’ professional experience). No respondent had less than 10 years of experience in the field of education with many having more than 20 years of experience.

Evaluation of Principals

Principal evaluation structure

Questions one, five, seven, eight and 10 of the survey addressed the structure of the principals’ evaluation. Sixty-five percent of the superintendents reported that the employment contracts for the principals they supervise specifically address evaluation. Thirty-one percent of the superintendents reported that although the principals they supervise do have an employment contract, there is no contractual language specifically addressing the evaluation of the principal. Four percent of the superintendents indicated that the principals under their supervision do not have a formal employment contract. Ninety-eight percent of the superintendents agreed that there are predetermined evaluative criteria, processes and instruments in place for principal evaluation.

Principal evaluation process

Questions two, six, and nine of the survey addressed the principal evaluation process. Ninety-three percent of the superintendents reported an annual pattern for formal principal evaluation, which reinforces the yearly timeframe as the norm in the profession. Approximately seven percent were evaluated more often than annually, with none evaluated less often than yearly. As part of the evaluation process, 98% of the superintendents reported using some predetermined criteria and 97% reported that they do make the principal aware of the criteria prior to beginning the evaluation process. This would be in keeping with established best practice (Catano & Strong, 2006; Popham, 1993; Rosenberg, 2001). Also, 92% of the superintendents agreed with being perceived as fair and unbiased.

The Likert portion of the survey included the following statement: Merit pay is a byproduct of the
evaluation process for principals. This statement about merit pay encompasses two dimensions of it. The first dimension simply addresses whether principal compensation is tied to the evaluation. The second, more subtle, dimension reveals the summative and formative aspects of the principals’ evaluation. Fixing compensation or offering a supplement to base salary, through merit pay, requires a judgment or summative evaluation of performance. Seventy-eight percent of the female superintendents disagreed, with 58% strongly disagreeing, with merit pay being contingent upon the principals’ evaluation. Fifty-nine percent of the male superintendents disagreed. Nine percent of the female superintendents agreed. In contrast, 24% of the male superintendents agreed that merit pay is a byproduct of the evaluation process. This suggests a much stronger sentiment among female superintendents that compensation should not be connected to the evaluation process, which may suggest that female superintendents prefer to emphasize the formative aspect of principal evaluation. These findings indicate the need for further study regarding the role that gender may play in the evaluation process.

Principal evaluation criteria

This survey queried superintendents regarding their knowledge of the Arizona Standards for School Administrators (ADE, 2010). These are performance standards developed by the Arizona Department of Education with the advice and assistance of administrator groups and other professionals in the field of educational leadership. Interestingly, although 93% of the superintendents reported that they were knowledgeable of the standards, only 85% of the superintendents indicated that they considered the evaluation standards during principal evaluation.

In addition to the Arizona Standards for School Administrators, superintendents were asked to identify and rank five items, from a list of 20, as criteria they used when evaluating principals. Listed in Table 2 are the 10 most frequently selected items. Table 3 lists the six least frequently selected criteria. These listings represent what the superintendents, as a group, identified as the most and least important criteria in the evaluation of principals.

The number one item selected by superintendents was “Instructional leadership” (84%). The second most frequently selected item was “maintaining a safe environment for students” (70%). Sixty-one percent selected “student performance measured by AIMS.” Relationship issues were selected by approximately half of the superintendents, i.e. relationships with employees (51%), relationship with parent community (47%) and evaluation of teachers (45%). The following is an example of the commentary that was provided in response to the open-ended questions:

1. Our evaluation includes a rubric with six dimensions. Each dimension has important, defining aspects of the dimensions. They are:
   
   - Instructional leadership
   - Development of human resources
   - Management
   - Technology (personal use and impact on learning)
   - Management of resources
• Development of leadership in self and others

2. Instrument needs revision to align to state standards.

3. Principals must be an effective CEO for this site. If they cannot perform well in this role, they must be replaced.


5. Use 360° process done by private firms.

The least important issues were the number of students going on to higher education and management of employee labor agreements. Also not considered important in the evaluation process were the success of the athletic program and the public speaking ability of the principal.

Discussion

There was strong sentiment expressed regarding the structure of principal evaluation. Nearly all superintendents expressed that utilizing a predetermined instrument, process and criteria was an established part of their routine for evaluation. They also indicated that principals should be aware of the criteria that will be utilized to evaluate their performance prior to their being evaluated.

When superintendents evaluate principals, the most frequently cited criterion is “Instructional leadership.” “Instructional leadership,” for principals, is an ambiguous, vague phrase lacking specificity. A clue as to what may be perceived as instructional leadership can be found in the third most frequently cited evaluative criterion, “Student performance measured by AIMS.” These survey results indicate that superintendents likely value instructional leadership that produces positive test score results. Given the violent events that have occurred in schools in recent years, it would likely be reassuring to the public, parents, students, and school faculty and staff, that the second most selected criterion was “Maintaining a safe environment for students.”

The least utilized items in the evaluative process were unexpected by the authors. The “Number of students going on to higher education” and “Success of the athletic program” were two of the least selected criteria for principal evaluation. The number of students going on to higher education has often been used as a measure of a school’s success. The same is true for the success of an athletic program. In the case of the latter, unsuccessful athletic programs may generate a lot of public pressure to penalize and/or replace school administrators. If evaluation does shape performance expectations, then the suggestion is that these issues are probably addressed in some way other than through the evaluation process.

Table 1

Indicators of Experience in Education as a Percentage of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>(n = 127)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year Ranges</td>
<td>Current Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 or more</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Percentage of Top Ten Principal Evaluation Criterion Reported*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining a safe environment for students</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student performance measured by AIMS</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with employees in building</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with the parent community</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of teachers</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of school improvement plan</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relation with students 29
Developing innovative education programs 27
Student discipline 22

Table 3

*Percentage of Bottom Six Principal Evaluation Criterion Reported*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students going on to higher education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of employee’s labor contract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success of the athletic program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking ability</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reducing or eliminating student rights</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal appearance</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

Arizona Revised Statute 15-353.


National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2010).


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