Southeast Journal of Educational Administration

Southeast Journal of Educational Administration

Angela Farmer, Editor
Mississippi State University

Evan G. Mense, SRCEA President
Southeastern Louisiana University

SRCEA
Southern Regional Council
on Educational Administration

Contents

Barriers to Fostering Student Success in High-Poverty, High-Minority, High-Achieving Rural Schools

William Andrew Bergeron
Auburn University
Frances Kochan
Auburn University
Ellen Reames
Auburn University

Abstract

This article presents the challenges facing high achieving, high poverty, and high minority rural schools in Alabama. This is part one of a three-part exploratory, qualitative, multi-case study, and it differs from most studies on the topic of overcoming the achievement gap in that the focus was on the perceptions of key stakeholders and not the programs, policies, curriculum, or leadership styles. We identified three major recurring perceptions of the challenges facing the participant schools centered on three themes: student-centered issues, school-level challenges, and limited community support. One of the interesting aspects of this research is that a number of the issues identified as barriers to school success, particularly in rural school districts, were not identified in previous research. This article provides a window into the challenges these high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural schools in Alabama face in their quest to close the existing achievement gap to ensure their students have the tools necessary to be successful both in school and as productive adults after they graduate.

Barriers to Fostering Student Success in High-Poverty, High-Minority, High Achieving Rural Schools

The most recent trends in school accountability in recent years have refocused reform efforts on setting high educational outcomes for all students (Kuel, 2012). The Department of Education Report, "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, focused the nation's attention, in part, on the achievement gap between white middle class students and the minority and low-income minority students. Research indicates that there is evidence of an identifiable achievement gap when students enter kindergarten (Chapin, 2006; Williams, 2011) and this achievement gap continues to grow throughout the students' school years (Williams 2011). Researchers point to multiple potential causes for this achievement gap between the white and minority and low-income students with no root cause identified to date (Williams, 2011). The educational achievement gap does have part of its roots in the history of the United States and slavery, closely followed by the Supreme Court Doctrine of Separate but Equal (1896). The inadequate funding continued even after the Brown V Topeka Board of Education 347 U.S. 483 (1954) overturned Plessy v. Ferguson 16 S. Ct. 1138 (1896).

Numerous state and local initiatives have been implemented throughout the nation in an attempt to close the achievement gap and assure that all students are successful in schools throughout the country. Although this gap is closely related to social and cultural components (Carey, 2014), much of the criticism about it focuses both the cause and solution squarely within the educational system with the conclusion that if the teachers and schools did a better job, there would be no achievement gap. While this conclusion may not be accurate, research does indicate that schools account for approximately forty percent of the impact on student achievement (Whitehurst, 2002). The research also indicates that the quality of the teacher has a direct connection to the educational achievement of students in high-poverty, high-minority students (Phillips, 2010) and that the quality of the school leadership affects student learning indirectly (Leithwood, 2010). Although the achievement gap persists throughout the country, there are schools in which this gap has narrowed or been overcome and in which students from high-poverty situations are thriving academically. In order to make this happen, schools must overcome many challenges. This research examined those challenges in an under-explored setting – rural schools. Rural schools, as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics, are schools that serve communities of 2,500 or fewer populations. (Locale codes 41Rural Fringe, 42-Rural Distant, and 43-Rural Remote).

Purpose of the Study

This is part one of a three-part study investigating high-performing, high-poverty rural high schools in Alabama. The purpose of this study was to understand what key stakeholders perceived as the challenges they had to overcome to achieve success. Although these schools have been successful in overcoming the challenges, they face, it is still important to identify the challenges so that those who work in similar schools can be aware of the difficulties they may face and develop strategies to overcome them. Thus, this study provides information for others interested in improving student learning and achievement and extends and enhances the existing research on improving student success in rural school settings.

Challenges to Student Success in Rural Schools

While literature reports many challenges in rural schools, it is important to note that there is a great deal of diversity in the rural population of the United States (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Thus, the challenges to rural education within different districts and states may vary widely (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012), and the needs of rural schools and their students can even vary within a single school district (Arnold, 2000). One of the pervasive challenges rural school systems face is the attitudes and prejudices of others toward them. Decision-makers and policy-makers often ignore their concerns and input during the problem solving and policy-development process (Williams & King, 2002). There is also evidence that there is a perception by many policymakers that rural is tantamount to being backwards and ignorant (Howley, 2001). This is sometimes coupled with a prevailing attitude of apathy and failure in high-poverty, high-minority school communities, meaning that rural schools must fight an uphill battle in their quest to improve student learning and achievement (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014).

Another major concern for rural schools is the high number of adults in the community who lack a high school diploma and are either unemployed or under-employed. This often results in high levels of persistent poverty that are intergenerational (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), increasingly low socio-economic populations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), and a highly transient population (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Research indicates that these realities can result in students not having a strong parental influence stressing the importance of learning and academic achievement and low expectations and/or resistance to change within the culture in which these schools operate (Williams & King, 2002).

Causes for the lack of strong parental influence may be the result of work conflicts, work hours, inflexible work schedules and work locations that are often in distant towns, transportation issues, embarrassment due to low parental educational levels or illiteracy, or lack of parental value on education (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). The lack of parental influence can lead to poor student motivation and attendance issues (Rosenberg et al., 2014).

Due to the sparsity of population and distances between homes, rural schools spend a higher percentage of their operating funds on transportation for students than other school systems. Additionally, many rural communities have limited business or industrial development resulting in a lack of employment opportunities for students, (Harmon, 2001), and a low tax base and a higher percentage of the land which is exempt from property taxes. The nature of rural communities and the lower tax base places additional stress on school leaders in the recruitment and retention of quality teachers along with limited or poor professional development programs available (King & Williams, 2002). There also tends to be a lack of adequate housing, jobs for spouses, and a lack of amenities to attract quality administrators and faculty. Thus, some personnel choose to live outside of the community. This can result in long commutes and extended time away from family and can reduce faculty and staff willingness to stay after work to provide the support and services. All of these factors often result in high teacher turnover (Harmon, 2001); making residents and parents in rural schools feel they have been abandoned (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010).

Methodology

This study used an exploratory, qualitative, multi-case study methodology. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The researchers also examined school websites, continuous improvement plans, and historical data including available agendas from faculty meetings, programs, and professional development. This study differs from most studies on the topic of overcoming the achievement gap in that the focus was on the perceptions of key stakeholders and not the programs, policies, curriculum, or leadership styles.

Population and Sample

This study examined three individual cases of high-minority, high-poverty, high achieving rural schools in Alabama. Each of the schools is from a different rural classification based on the U.S. Department of Education (2006) locale codes of rural fringe, census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster; rural distant, Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster; and rural remote, Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. This was done to assure that the study examined rural education in a holistic manner. A three-step criterion sampling process (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools for inclusion in this study. An analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics database for the school year 2003–2004 identified 234 rural schools with a locale code of 41, rural fringe; 42, rural distant; and 43, rural remote in Alabama. Once all the rural schools in Alabama were identified, the researcher eliminated all the schools that did not have a minimum of 65% free/reduced price lunch to establish the definition of high poverty for this study. This resulted in a collection of 56 schools. After establishing the high-poverty schools, the researcher identified the schools with a minimum minority population of 65% resulting in a group of 16 schools. Finally, schools failing to meet 100% of their Annual Yearly Progress goals were eliminated, resulting a collection of only 12 high schools. The schools with the highest combination of the three screening factors, high-poverty, high-minority, and high achieving, were contacted and asked to participate in the study. This process was repeated until one school from each of the rural classifications agreed to participate.

Data Collection

Once the schools were selected, a combination of random purposeful and snowball sampling was used to identify the actual participants (Bernard & Ryan, 2010 & Creswell, 2007). Individuals were selected for participation based on their position or knowledge of the school. A review of the school's website and the local phone directory, retrieved electronically, were used to identify these key stakeholders. A total of 29 interviews were conducted, lasting between 20 minutes and one-hour and 15 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participant's position, type school, gender, and race are listed in Table 1. During each interview, the participants were asked to identify others who may have an interest or knowledge useful for inclusion in this study.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant's Position	Type School	Gender	Race
Principal	Rural Fringe	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Assistant Principal	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Male	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Classified	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Principal	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Parent	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Classified	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Parent	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Instructional Partner	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Parent	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Male	Black
Classified	Rural Remote	Female	Black

Percentage of Respondents by Category

21% Community Stakeholders	59% Educators	20% Parents
41% Rural Fringe	34% Rural Distant	24% Rural Remote
Male 31%	Female 69%	
Black 76%	White 24%	

Data Analysis

The data collected from individual interviews were analyzed in what Creswell (2013) identified as the data analysis spiral of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sensemaking. The reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data were accomplished in

a multi-step process. An initial reading of the data was done to get a feel for the information and to develop an understanding it (Creswell, 2013). During this initial reading of the data, a running commentary was made in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The second reading was used to conduct open-ended coding, breaking the raw data down into ideas and meanings (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). It was during this process that emergent codes were developed (Berg & Lune, 2012). Finally, a pass was made through the data from an a-priori perspective. These a-priori codes were developed in advance based on our understanding of the current research (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Findings

These schools were successful in developing strategies to deal with the challenges they faced in fostering student achievement. However, these challenges, identified below, persisted and required the participant schools to remain focused and monitor teaching, learning, and student achievement to ensure continued success. The researcher identified three major recurring perceptions of the challenges facing the participant schools, as described by the key stakeholders. The major recurring perceptions centered around three themes: student-centered issues, school-level challenges, and limited community support. These three major perceptions were further broken down into sub-themes. In order to be included as a theme, the topic had to be identified as important by a minimum of forty percent of the participants interviewed. These themes and subthemes are outlined in Table 2. Each of these major stakeholder perceptions and the corresponding sub-themes are addressed in detail in this section.

Table 2
Challenges Perceptions and Sub-themes

Student-Centered Issues	Limited Community Support	School-level Challenges
Negative Pressures on Students	Divided Community	Teacher Attitude
Lack of Security and Stability	Public verses Private Schools	Limited Resources
Motivational Issues		Lack of Local Control

Student-Centered Themes

The first theme identified as a barrier to be overcome in fostering student success was categorized as student centered. Student-centered issues are those that are typically outside of the schools' normal span of control. The major sub-themes identified within the data are negative pressures on students, motivational issues, and a lack of security and stability. Each of these subthemes is perceived as having a significant impact on the student's ability and desire to be successful in school.

Negative pressures on students.

Seventy-five percent of the participants believed that negative pressure on students was a key challenge in improving student learning and achievement. This negative pressure on students stems from several factors. The student's family situation and environment seemed to be a determining factor in the student's ability and desire to be successful academically. One teacher

stated, "…what's hurting them is their home background, the lack of and level of support from their families and home environment."

This lack of family support and encouragement is not only obvious to the staff and faculty of the participant high schools, but to the community stakeholders as well. As one key stakeholder stated, "…I think it's a lack of effort on the parents' part and it's heartbreaking to me that a child goes home with a folder and it doesn't get signed because the parents don't care about what their grades are." In addition to seemingly disinterested parental involvement, there are also concerns about the environment some of the students are coming from and returning to after the school day. One parent stated that,

> ... I think it all starts at home. If you don't have the support at home and you have to live in some of the stuff that some of the kids have to live in and you want to come to school and do math or do something, I mean they can't think about things like that when they live in who knows what at home.

This concern about the home environment extended out into the community in general. Many of the participants expressed concern about disruptions from the community being brought to school and upsetting the positive achievements being made by the students. As one parent stated, "…the negative stuff that takes place in the community has a drawback when you're trying to do things on the positive side and then you have other people pulling against you".

All of this turmoil in a student's home environment sometimes creates a learning climate for the students that may cause them to fail in reaching their full potential. There appears to be two powerful forces working against the students in these participant schools. A major contributing factor in this phenomenon is that many of these students face a daily onslaught of peer pressure to come up short academically. One teacher stated it this way, "…I would say peer pressure, the students not wanting to meet their full potential or give 120% because it is not the cool thing to do. Everybody's not doing it or they don't think it's cool."

A final, and alarming, finding within this area is the active undermining of the students' education by significant family members. Some participants shared that many of these students are being raised in an environment that discourages them from working to their full potential and provides a great deal of negative motivation that makes it very difficult for the teachers to overcome in the relatively short period of time these students are in school. There is a pervasive attitude of many of the students that there is no need to obtain an education because there is no possibility of bettering their circumstances. As one parent explained, "We've got a lot of parents that are against that [obtaining a quality education]. You're against that because you don't have any motivation yourself, to have enough self-esteem about yourself to meet the requirements to help that child". A community stakeholder stated it this way:

> If I see a certain type of lifestyle as a child then I'm thinking that's going to be the system, or that's what my life is going to be like…Why do I need to get a high school education? By God, why do I need to learn a skill or go to college? I think those are some of the things that some of these children face...

Several of the participants expressed a concern that minority parents were fostering this type of attitude where parents, in some case, are actively holding their children back, some who

do not want to see their child be more successful in life than they were. Several participants went even further expressing concerns that parents were teaching their children that they were being held down. A teacher and pastor of a church stated it this way:

> A slave man mentality and it just bothers me so because we build up hindrances and we say the white man's trying to hold me down, nobody's going to let me do this, we can't do that, we came from this, and they instill this into their kids.

This negativity from the parents and students actively pushing this anti-education agenda results in a lack of buy-in from a number of other students and parents has resulted in a "…culture of indifference" (Teacher).

Lack of security and stability.

Many of the students from the schools participating in this study have experienced long-term intergenerational poverty. The key stakeholders reported that they are faced with the challenge that they are the primary, stable, guiding influence to many of their students. Faced with the challenge of educating these students, 56% of the participants identified a lack of security and stability outside of schools as a contributing factor hindering student learning and achievement. Many of the students attending the schools participating in this study come from single-parent homes or are being raised by their grandmothers without an adult male. Discussing this, one teacher stated, "…they are missing a family member…that's hurtful. They don't know how to deal with that, a lot of single mothers." This is further exasperated when the guardian/caregiver is a grandparent. A teacher explained:

> I think sometimes when parents are not there, you have a guardian, which is usually your grandparents in those areas. Grandparents don't know as much … they're older, so they only know to provide, sometimes they don't have the educational background to assist those kids.

Additionally, the harsh reality for many of the students attending the participant schools is that "…we have a large group that doesn't have any family life, so to speak.… We have students who when they leave school on Friday afternoon, they may not know where their next meal is coming from" (Community Stakeholder). Unfortunately, for some of the students in the participant schools their education is not a major priority, survival is their focus.

In addition to a lack of security and stability at home, some of these students are faced with living in a chaotic community that does not provide the student with any sense of stability or security. Many of these students are exposed to experiences that are foreign to most of the staff and faculty at the school. One parent expressed their concern by stating, [There is] a lot going on with the children, and all. You have to face, 'I had a bad night last night,' if you're not aware, you've never experienced that, then you're not going to see that child what [child] going through.

When the students come to school, the staff and faculty often do not know what baggage the students are carrying from the weekend or the night before that will affect their attitude and ability to learn. A result of the lack of stability and security in these students' lives is the very

real issue that the schools are operating in an environment that is unfamiliar to the students and, as one stakeholder observed,

> Trying to teach them in an environment that they're not accustomed to...some of them are not used to being given orders and being expected to obey. They're used to doing what they want to do, in their home or in the community or whatever. I would say the barriers are breaking them from habits that are not allowed within the school environment, as well as when a child does something out of the norm, or that's unacceptable at school. (Teacher)

These participant schools have challenges to improving student learning and achievement. There is a direct connection between the parent's ideas and attitudes about education and their student's level of achievement (Farmer, et al., 2006; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Parental attitudes and a more challenging student body result in schools spending more time and their limited resources for non-educational purposes such as security and transportation than their more affluent counterpart schools (Carey, 2014; Crowe, 2013). Respondents report that these schools are attempting to teach the state course of study and remediating both educational and social skill deficiencies all within the 180-day school year. Although, they appear to have been able to overcome this barrier, participants view this as a significant challenge.

Motivational issues.

A natural result of the negative environment of many of the students attending the participating schools is a culture of indifference, lack of motivation, and lack of perseverance to work at being successful academically. Motivation was identified by fifty-four percent of the participants as a major challenge. The staff and faculty of the participating schools report that the students' level of indifference and lack of motivation hinders the schools' ability to create a culture of learning among the students. A significant attitude of many of the students at the participant schools is one of being checked-out or disinterested. A participant teacher believed that the school had a significant group of students "…who haven't bought in…they're not invested. They're checked out" (Teacher). Participants reported that when some of these students encounter an obstacle they just give up and they do not attempt to remove that obstruction to their progress. One teacher stated, "…they lack motivation, perseverance, and drive to continue to go forward. As soon as they run into an obstacle, then they quit and give up…" (Teacher). This teacher expressed a concern that these students had not developed the coping mechanisms that were necessary to accept these challenges. Beginning in kindergarten, they develop a deficit in learning because they are not ready for the structures and context of schooling and the deficit continues to grow throughout their educational career. One teacher said, "When they come through the door they don't think they can do anything." Respondents shared their belief that once these students start thinking that they were incapable of learning they lose their motivation to try. One teacher shared that, "…we have a small population of students that just don't see the big picture…and some of them just don't have any hope…" Another said, "It's just that sometimes our kids come to us so far behind…which if you're teaching, you only have 180 days…" Respondents from all participant schools reported that they struggled to reach this group of unmotivated students. Additionally, these schools were constantly striving to create a

pervasive culture of learning and achievement throughout the entire student body of their schools.

Limited Community Support

All of the participant schools are located in economically depressed areas that have suffered a loss of business and industry over the past several years with a corresponding increase in the level of poverty in the public schools as evidenced by a dramatic increase in the number of students receiving free and reduced price meals at school. The researcher had trouble with obtaining community stakeholder input during the data-gathering process. Many, certainly not all, of the governmental and community stakeholders would not return repeated attempts to schedule an interview. Not a single mayor of the towns these schools are located in agreed to be interviewed for this project. This is evidence of the last theme identified as a barrier to success— limited community support. This theme has two subthemes: divided community and public/private schools.

Public verses private schools.

In all three communities, the public schools are predominantly black and the private schools are predominantly white, resulting in 54% of the participants sharing their belief that there was a public school versus private school fissure in the community. When integration became mandatory during the early 1970s, there was a dramatic increase in the number of private schools with a corresponding loss of the middle class, primarily White students in public schools. One school stakeholder expressed her frustration by saying many businesses "…send their children and money to the private school, but the entire community supports their business." One parent went even further when she stated "…They'll tell us we don't support,… your fundraising or whatever …then you know you need to get your parents on board and say, 'Well look, if you can't support us then we are not going to support you.'"

Until recently, many of these private schools limited the ability of minority students to attend or even visit their facilities. One school stakeholder reported, "I look at it and I say, 'Even if you go back to just 10 years ago, they didn't want you out there.' They didn't even allow the Black police officers to go out there for anything." One parent stated the problem very elegantly, "…it's the same old stuff [racism] from way back that just keeps coming and never leaves…"

Divided community.

The communities of the participating schools have suffered tremendously with the loss of the textile industry, which occurred after 1994. This loss of employment resulted in a large percentage of middle-class students and families relocating away from the communities. This loss of the middle class has changed the culture of the school with a very high percentage of students living in poverty, something most teachers have never experienced. Because of this shift, fifty-two percent of the participants expressed concern that their community was divided. The most common perception of the school/parent stakeholders of the involvement and commitment of the business and industry to the local public schools is "…standoffish… at best" (Support Staff). However, one community stakeholder stated "…There is involvement. There's

not enough involvement. I feel like…I think it could be better…" The perception of many of the staff and faculty of the participant schools is that the majority of the businesses in these communities are owned or managed by business people who "will not step up to the plate to help the schools out [and are hurting student achievement]." One teacher shared how this relates to the creation of a divided community in which these business people do not see the connections between them and their families and the community as a whole when she stated:

> What they're missing is that we're educating their employees. If they want an educated, literate, vital workforce, because our kids aren't moving anywhere, they don't have the resources to move anywhere at present, these are the people that are going to come knocking on their doors.

There were those school-level stakeholders who added "…we don't have a good name in the community…" (Parent) while another parent believed that "…we don't have a positive image in our community and people giving good feedback…" The perception of the lack of support for the participant school was not always echoed by the community stakeholders; however, one community stakeholder's perception was that there had been little or limited effort to bring the community stakeholders into the discussion. A community stakeholder stated, "…it was like the schools are over here and we're over here…". It appears the lack of community support of the participant school may not be a one-sided issue and both the school and community may be responsible for this problem. Therefore, it may be only through cooperation between the community and schools that this challenge will be corrected.

School-Level Challenges

Closely following student-centered issues are issues within the school. These challenges manifested themselves in a variety of ways including a lack of local (school-level) control, limited resources and teacher attitude.

Lack of local control.

A major concern identified by 57% of the participants was the belief that there was a lack of ability to provide programs tailored to meet the specific needs of their student body because schools and teachers lacked decision-making power about these programs. Many of the participants expressed concern with a one-size-fits-all mentality of many policymakers at all levels of the educational bureaucracy. One principal commented that:

> … sometimes we kind of jump on the bandwagon this is a good program I heard about it somewhere. We just go buy it instead of trying it out and see if really works. Not really doing a lot of research to say okay, is this going to work with our population… What schools have this worked with that have the same type of population, same type of kids that we have.

> Additionally, participants stated that many times the decision-makers at all levels are so far removed from the populations of these high-poverty, high-minority, high-functioning schools. One participant stated:

> … I don't necessarily think they hear the voices of the people in this area because most of the people that make the decision[s], their kids are in private schools but they're making decisions for public schools, because they don't care about it anyway.

The overriding attitude of decision-makers is this program, idea, or concept will work at all schools. One teacher stated it this way "…Even though we live in the Black Belt area, all the schools are different, and all those children are different. You have to meet the needs of the children that are in your school". One key stakeholder stated, "Even at the state level we're seeing, we're still kind of jumping, as they say we're flying the plane and putting it together as we're flying it."

This frustration runs deep within the staff and faculty of the participant schools. Many of the school-level staff and faculty believe that the individuals at the central office are too far removed from the everyday grind of educating today's students. One teacher expressed his frustration:

> …but I do know there have been times that the decisions they've made, if they would have asked [for] teacher input it would've gone a lot better, because when you're sitting in the central office and you make a decision as to what they should do as whole in the classroom you don't get the full effect of not being there.

This educator went on to say that many decisions do not account for the different demographics of schools within the system. He stated that:

> ... Our other county school has maybe 900-1000 students, where we have 200-300 and some decisions …with the numbers, … the different race and all the other things factor in, it just does not work.

Many of the staff and faculty expressed concern with the one-size-fits-all approach to solving the educational problems. They believe that each school system and schools within the same school system have unique problems that require differentiated solutions.

Limited resources.

Fifty-seven percent of the participants identified the lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of their students and to fulfil the expectations of the communities as a challenge, which is exasperated by the very nature of rural communities. As previously noted, these small rural communities have a very limited tax base and with the loss of industry since 1994, these communities suffered a loss of employment opportunities and a subsequent loss of population. A key stakeholder from one community stated the problem as he saw it is, "…the number one issue. We don't have a lot of people paying sales tax; we don't have a lot of people paying property tax…that's why economic development is important because it affects so many things."

Limited resources hinder the schools' ability to provide for their students and in these high-poverty, high-minority rural schools, the needs are great. The state of Alabama uses a school funding formula that is based on student enrollment without considering the needs of the student body. Unlike wealthier communities, which support their schools with local taxes in addition to the taxes received from the state, these schools are almost completely dependent on state funding for providing educational opportunities to meet the needs of their students, and this funding tends to be inadequate. One teacher stated,

Even though we are a small school and in our state our teachers are funded by our enrollment, our enrollment is hurting us... we do the bare minimum of what we can offer our students. And that each teacher, like take me, I teach six different [grade] levels.

Another teacher lamented, "…the fact that we don't have the funds to hire more highly educated teachers, that's one hindrance." These schools are stretching teachers to ensure they can meet the needs of their students. These participant schools lack the ability to provide programs to enable their students, who often begin school without the basic skills necessary, to remediate educational shortfalls.

In addition to not having adequate resources to deal with the academic and personal needs of students, staff and faculty from all the schools expressed concern with their inability to provide adequate and appropriate after-school activities. As one individual stated,

We used to have a tutoring program a few years back that we no longer have because of funding. In addition, when we did have that, the buses would stay over, [to transport student home] so a lot of it is because of funding and transportation. (Teacher)

Two final concerns related to limited resources, expressed primarily by the key stakeholders from the communities in which the participant schools were located, were the condition of the facilities and the lack of adequate teaching resources. One key community stakeholder believed, "We're in a county that has very aging infrastructure for our schools…" More specifically, many of the stakeholders believed that the condition of the school's physical plant was hurting the recruitment of businesses and industry. A community stakeholder shared, "… I would like to see new capital improvements… I don't think we have that wow factor capital improvement wise." The community stakeholders were not only concerned with the physical appearance of the school facilities; they also expressed concern with the lack of funding for teaching materials and classroom supplies. One community stakeholder believed that, "…what would really help our schools …is more capital.… We have good administrators, we have good teachers, but a lot of times those teachers are pulling money out of their own pockets to supply classroom resources." One of the support personal griped "…teachers are always complaining they need more [supplies and money]" (Support Staff).

Teacher attitude.

Research indicates that teachers have an impact on student learning and achievement. Although when dealing with the strengths of the school, there were many remarks made about the dedication of teachers and their commitment to students, 43% of the participants identified some teachers' attitudes as a contributing factor to a lack of student learning and achievement. This issue did not refer to teachers not caring about students, but rather that there was sometimes a pervasive sense of discouragement among some of the teachers. This perception of a sense of discouragement emerged across the spectrum of the participants. A prominent factor was primarily related to the current emphasis on measuring and then publicly displaying student achievement data labeling schools as failing and/or as not meeting student performance or growth expectations. Talking about this, one teacher stated:

There was a beat down feeling… we were trying so many different things that what am I supposed to focus on? What is it that's really important? I couldn't get a clear picture….

It's like you can't succeed, you're not going to be good enough. You're not, period… (Teacher)

This sense of discouragement appears to stem, in part, from the fact that change is hard, and it seems to be constant. Participants expressed the idea that any change disrupts the teacher's normal classroom routines. As a parent points out, "sometimes its teachers, [the faculty and] staff is just as bad as some of the students." This sense of discouragement, in some cases, has resulted in an attitude of complacency within the school.

This attitude of complacency sometimes results in a lack of faculty engagement and encouragement of these students. As a teacher shared, "They [teachers] don't see that their attitude towards the kids creating the attitude the kids have towards school and the teachers." Another teacher agreed stating, "…we've had some teachers that are kind of just complacent, did not want to change, and even if it's not a drastic change, just a slight change…" Even some parents interviewed expressed concern that the teachers' attitudes were having a significant negative impact on student learning and achievement. One parent shared her concern about some teachers' attitudes, "…teachers that haven't put in the effort that they should. Some are just there for the paycheck."

Discussion

One of the interesting aspects of this research is that a number of the issues identified in the research as barriers to school success, particularly in rural school districts, were not identified as problems in this study. While the existing research indicates that these schools have highly transient populations (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), demographic makeup of the three participant schools have been relatively stable for about 20 years or longer. Likewise, while the research identifies high teacher turnover as a difficulty (Harmon, 2001), many of these three participant schools had a very stable staff and faculty, many with tenures in excess of 20 years. Additionally, while two of the principals were new to their positions, they had been a part of the school staff and faculty for 20 plus years.

Finally, inadequate professional development is identified as a barrier to schools and student success in the existing literature (Williams & King, 2002). However, the staff and faculty did not identify this as a problem and in fact indicated they had multiple professional development opportunities. Many also discussed attending university classes and conducting book studies to supplement the professional development provided by their schools.

The fact that these elements were not identified as barriers to success may be related to the fact that these schools have had some success in overcoming the barriers they face as evidenced by their high levels of student success. The issues related specifically to high teacher and student turnover may be related to the location of these schools in the rural south being less transient than in other parts of the country. These findings bear further examination and research.

Student-Centered Issues

The most significant challenge facing the participant school is the pressure these students face, both active and passive, to not meet their educational potential. These schools face a

prevailing attitude of apathy and failure (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). Many of the participants discussed the family environment that is a major influence on these students. There is a belief by many that they will never increase their standard of living so why are they worried about an education, when they are stuck in poverty and there is no way out.

While the challenge of family dynamics is not new in the literature, typically low parental educational levels, unemployment/underemployment, parental apathy, and absentee parents all are extensively discussed in the existing research (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). However, this study identified a disturbing trend of active parental discouragement of students working to be successful in school, as well as in life beyond high school. Some of the discouragement can be very subtle, such as parents with a negative attitude, and it can also be brazen. While it is true that not all, not even the majority, of the students attending these participant schools have parents expressing these blatantly anti-education attitudes, the data suggest that there are a number of families who espouse this philosophy. This philosophy also spreads through peer pressure from student to student.

School-Level Challenges

Most of the students attending these participating high schools come from economically disadvantaged families with parents working long hours and often multiple jobs, which may keep them from providing the appropriate level of parental supervision (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). Often there is nobody at home when their students get out of school to help them with their studies, homework, or resolve issues and conflicts appropriately. These participating high schools are challenged with providing a basic education to their students and teaching many of the soft skills necessary to be successful. The challenge of addressing all of these students' needs, as one teacher said, means taking a "…holistic approach…" This places additional stress on the already limited resources available for these high-poverty, high-minority schools and places the staff and faculty in a position of taking on the roles of both teacher and parent in many cases. Thus, it seems important to hire staffs who have a commitment beyond merely teaching a subject.

Another school-level challenge is the apparent laser-like focus of many key policy and decision makers on the latest and greatest educational panacea that has resulted in a high level of resistance and confusion for the staff and faculty. The constantly shifting winds of the "fix" for all the challenges in educating students' results in confusion, frustration, and a feeling of discouragement for the staff and faculty. There was a part of the staff and faculty of each school that did not want any change; they outright resisted change for the sake of resisting. However, many of the staff and faculty expressed the concern that many policy and decision makers simply jumped on the bandwagon of some new idea or program they learned about at a conference or meeting. There was the belief that no one was asking the right questions about the utility of the program for their particular school or student population.

It is clear in the available existing research that schools can be very different, even within the same district (Stoll, 2009). This lack of differentiation can result in a lack of teacher buy-in and a feeling of discouragement that results from the failure of these one-size-fits-all policy decisions that do not meet the needs of the particular school's student population.

Community

The perceptions of many of the school-level stakeholders toward community involvement and support of the school are mixed at best. All three schools have businesses that are involved and support the local schools. However, the greatest support and enthusiasm comes from the minority-owned and operated businesses in the communities surrounding the school. Many of the school-level stakeholders believed that some businesses failed to realize that while their children were being educated in the private schools, many, if not most, of their employees are being educated in the public school they chose to ignore. Often, the school-level stakeholders expressed concern that there was a level of racism in these business owners' decisions to limit their support of the public schools one white teacher went so far as to call the private schools, racist academies.

To be sure, the challenges in all three participating school communities are not one-sided issues. Many of the community stakeholders expressed frustration with the lack of interaction of the school-level leadership with the community civic and business organizations. Issues can range from outright racism to a poor image of a school that resulted from mismanagement of donated funds and items by someone connected to the school, either a school employee or a booster club member. The solution to the school-community challenge will require effort by the school-level leadership and the business community to resolve these challenges to benefit not only the students but also the community, business, and industry.

Implications for Practice

The ability to generalize these findings is limited; however, the findings do provide some insight into how to overcome these challenges to ensure higher levels of student learning and achievement. The perceptions of the participants interviewed for this research indicated that the greatest challenge, they faced were student-centered challenges as indicated by 62% of those interviewed.

While this is very difficult to overcome, the staff and faculty interviewed believed they could make a difference. The stakeholders believed that in the end the solution to combating student apathy was ensuring they put the needs, not the wants, of their students first. They believed that placing the needs of the students at the top while acting as a successful role model provides students the example they need. Many understood that no matter how hard the staff and faculty tried or wanted students to become dedicated students, it was going to take time to undo the negative attitudes and work habits. The lack of parental concern and involvement in their child's education can be a mitigating factor the schools will have difficulty overcoming. It appears that schools will have to strive to build a sense of community within the school, foster student belief in themselves, create student opportunities for success and reach out to parents in a wide variety of ways.

Of the school-level challenges, school leadership has the challenge of molding policy directives from the central office and State Department of Education to fit their particular staff, faculty, and student body. The challenge is to differentiate the often one-size-fits-all policy to fit the unique characteristics of their school. The principals participating in this study found the

sweet spot in the policies and tweaked them to meet their needs. Additionally, the challenge of teacher attitude is tied in part to this one-size-fits-all mentaly. With the constant shifting solutions for educational challenges, teachers do not have a strong grasp on what is the best practice of the day.

Often it appears that the foundations of educational programs are built on shifting sand, not a solid footing. Providing more local input into curriculum decision-making and selecting programs to meet the needs of the local student body are imperative to improving teaching, student learning, and achievement while improving teacher buy-in to the programs. School leadership should work with their central office to ensure the fixes are tailored and flexible enough to meet the needs of their particular school.

Each of the participant schools existed in a divided community where most of the minority students attended public schools and most of the White students attended the local private schools. The solution to the school-community challenge will require effort by the school-level leadership and the business community to resolve these challenges to benefit not only the students but also the community, business, and industry. The key to creating community involvement in the schools is a robust effort to involve community stakeholders, not just parents, in the decision-making process. One participant school was working with the town government in the restoration of a building that was designated to become the only local food store. It is important for school leadership to become involved in the community helping to create an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect within the entire community. It should be noted that none of the elected officials contacted in any of the communities participated in this study.

Future Research

This study focused on the high-poverty, high-minority, high-achieving rural high schools in Alabama. While this research did verify some findings of previous research that focused on rural schools, it also discovered some interesting areas for future study. One of the most important of these is the need to further study the phenomenon of parents actively discouraging their children's academic learning and achievement. An additional area of future study is how differentiation of policy and programs, providing more local control to match the needs of individual schools and their student bodies, could yield a significant impact on closing the achievement gap. Finally, it might be of value to examine whether there are differences in attitudes, teaching approaches, and student success levels based on their perceptions of hindrances to student success based on teacher gender, background in terms of whether or not they were born and raised in the community, ethnicity, and type of teaching institution from which they graduated (i.e., Historically Black or White colleges or universities, public or private institutions).

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to gather the perceptions of the participant schools' key stakeholders to identify the challenges rural high schools either have overcome or are struggling with to ensure the greatest possible level of student learning and achievement. The very nature of qualitative research makes the generalizability of these finding difficult. However, these findings

provide a window into the challenges these high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural schools in Alabama are facing in their quest to close the existing achievement gap to ensure their students have the tools necessary to be successful both in school and as productive adults after they graduate.

The findings of this research suggest that it is critical for the leadership of these high-poverty, high-minority rural schools in Alabama to understand not only the educational aspects of creating a high-achieving student body, but also the dynamic forces outside of the school that impact student learning and achievement. These findings suggest that the challenges facing the participant schools require a set of solutions that are tailored or differentiated to meet the needs of that particular student body and community. The findings should provide a window for thinking about these issues and for fostering future research about them beyond Alabama to achieve greater success in rural schools throughout the nation.

References

Arnold, M. L. (2000). Rural schools: Diverse needs call for flexible policies. Aurora: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED441656.pdf

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). Qualitative Research Methods for Social Sciences. Boston: Pearson.

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Brown v. Topeka Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Carey, R. L. (2014). A cultural analysis of the achievement gap discourse: Challenging the language and labels used in the work of school reform. *Urban Education*, *49*(4), 440-468. doi:10.1177/0042085913507459.

Chapin, J. (2006). The achievement gap in social studies and science starts early: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study. *The Social Studies*, *97*(2), 231-238.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

DeCuir-Gunby, J., Marshall, P., & McCulloch, A. (2011). Developing and using a codebook for the analysis of interview data: An example from a professional development research project. *Field Methods*, *23*(2), 136-155.

Harmon, H. L. (2001). *Education issues in rural America*. ARSI Conference on Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural School Settings (pp. 1-18). Lexington: ERIC.

Howley, C. (2001). Understanding the circumstances of rural schooling: The parameters of respectful research. *Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural Schools* (pp. 1-8). Lexington: ERIC.

Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). Educational barriers of rural youth: Relation of individual and contextual difference variables. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *20*(1), 71-87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105

Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2009). *Why rural matters 2007: State and regional challenges and opportunities*. Arlington, VA: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Kein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters 2013–2014: The condition of rural education in the 50 states*. Washington DC: Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

Kuel, R. A. (2012). The rhetorical presidency and "accountability" in education reform: Comparing the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. *Southern Communication Journal*, *77*(4), 329-348. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926

Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *9*(3), 245-291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500.

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *24*(1), 1-18.

Maxwell, G. M., Huggins, K. S., & Scheurich, J. J. (2010). How one historically underperforming diverse rural high school achieved a successful turnaround. *Planning and Changing*, *3*(4), 161-186. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ952379.pdf

Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Phillips, K. J. (2010). What does "highly qualified" mean for student achievement? Evaluating the relationships between teacher quality indicators and at-risk students' mathematics and reading achievement gains in first grade. *The Elementary School Journal*, *110*(4), 464-493. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651192

Plessy v. Ferguson 16 S. Ct. 1138 (1896).

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Evaluation. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144013/pdf/20144013.pdf

Stoll, L. (2009). Capacity building for school improvement or capacity for learning? A changing landscape. *Journal of Educational Change*, *10*(2-3), 115-127. doi:10.1007/s10833-009-9104-3

U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A Nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington DC: The National Commission on Excellence in Education.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. (2006). *Rural education in America*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

Whitehurst, G. (2002). Improving teacher quality. *Journal of State Government*, *75*(3), 12-15.

Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). The value of people, place and possibilities: A multiple case study of rural high school completion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *29*(9), 1-18. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/29-9.pdf

Williams, A. (2011). A Call for Change: Narrowing the Achievement Gap between White and Minority Students. *The Clearing House*, *84*(2), 65-71. doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.511308

Williams, D. T., & King, J. R.-E. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double edged legacy of school desegregation*. Washington DC: The Rural Schools and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/DoubleEdged_Leg

Preparing Principals to Lead in Today's Varied Educational Settings

Doug Dwain Thomas
University of Central Missouri
Bryan McDonald
University of Central Missouri
Henry Russell
University of Central Missouri
Sandy Hutchinson
University of Central Missouri

Abstract

The role of school leaders varies greatly from community to community, school to school. The demands on these positions are impacted by student demographics, organizational variables, and community traditions. Principal preparation programs must prepare aspiring school leaders for these unique demands, often serving candidates from urban, suburban, and rural communities. This article examines three different cohort-based preparation programs specifically geared toward addressing the unique leadership challenges associated with urban, suburban, and rural schools. The authors found that the cohort model, modified for the different demographics, provided not only the required skill set and knowledge base, but the flexibility and support needed for the candidates, as well. Modified curriculum and built in accommodations supported the aspiring school leaders preparing to work in suburban, rural, or urban school settings, each characterized by its own unique sources of issues and challenges.

Preparing Principals to Lead in Today's Varied Educational Settings

Currently, there is great interest in how quality leadership preparation is related to leadership practice and improved teacher outcomes (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). In this paper, the authors provide an account of the development and delivery of cohort-based principal preparation programs specifically developed to serve the unique needs of rural, suburban, and urban schools. The first cohort program was delivered in 2002 in partnership with 14 suburban school districts outside of Kansas City. Working from this model, revisions were implemented to serve educators from rural districts in central Missouri. Lastly, the cohort model was implemented to provide leadership preparation programs geared toward meeting the unique demands of urban education.

When considering the principal preparation programs, it is important to note the substantive changes that have occurred over the past years that have had an effect on the responsibilities of the principal. Society is becoming increasingly diverse and the traditional two-parent family of the 1960s, in which the father worked and the mother stayed at home with the children, is more the exception than the norm. Schools operate today notably differently from the ones of just a few years ago. The global economy is transforming the 21st century workplace for which schools must prepare students. Technologies are advancing faster than ever (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). Poverty is increasing, indexes of physical, mental, and moral well-being are declining, and the stock of social capital is decreasing. "Without question, such changes are creating myriad challenges for educational leaders" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 1).

In addition to the changes in society, there are increasing demands that all schools educate all students to a high level. Accreditation of schools is largely based on student performance on state-mandated assessments. In Missouri, schools that do not meet the state standards may be declared academically deficient, with the possibility that the state may take over operation of the schools. As a result, school districts are looking for administrators who can come into a school and establish a learning community in which students and staff members focus on teaching and learning.

As a result of the changes in society and the increased accountability of the schools, the role of the principal has changed from that of a building manager to that of an instructional leader. Principals no longer have the luxury of maintaining the status quo in their buildings. They must continually analyze their programs and procedures and make adjustments that will improve conditions for students and staff (Wallace Foundation, 2013). As stated by Tirozzi (2001), the principals of tomorrow's schools will not be recognized and rewarded solely for their managerial skills; they will be recognized as leaders of curricular change, innovative and diversified instructional strategies, data-driven decision making, and the implementation of accountability models for students and staff. For administrative candidates to meet the challenges of the schools of today, the administration preparation program must have a strong focus on instructional leadership.

University of Central Missouri

University of Central Missouri (UCM) was founded in 1871 as a normal school. Housed in Warrensburg, Missouri, UCM is located approximately 40 miles from the metropolitan Kansas City area. As of Fall 2016, 13,099 students were enrolled at UCM, including 9,786 undergraduate and 4,202 graduate students (UCM, 2016). UCM's motto, *Learning to a Greater Degree*, helps define the mission of UCM. Four pillars support the mission: Engaged Learning, Future-focused Academics, Worldly Perspective, and Culture of Service (UCM, 2016). Classes are offered on the Warrensburg campus and through the Office of Extended Campus online, ITV, off campus, and at Missouri Innovation Center (MIC) in Lee's Summit, MO, a 45-minute drive from the main campus.

UCM has a long history of preparing teachers and administrators for Missouri schools and is one of the largest educator preparation programs in the state. UCM has been accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) since 1954. Graduate programs include MSE, MAT, and EdS degrees in educational leadership, library media specialist, Career and Technical Education (CTE) Leadership, curriculum and instruction, reading specialist, math specialist, special education, special education director, and literacy, as well as other areas. The UCM School Administration program is nationally recognized by the Education Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC).

The UCM principal preparation program is state-approved, and aligned with both national standards (ELCC) and the Missouri Standards for Professional Educators (MOSPE). State requirements also set the curriculum and practicum requirements of 300 hours of administrative observations and/or activities.

In additional to addressing the national and state standards, the principal preparation programs are also geared toward preparing candidates for the high-stakes certification tests required by the state. Missouri now requires two assessments for principal certification. One is a series of three performance tasks that focus on (a) identifying a problem, researching the issue, and developing a plan to address the problem; (b) creating a professional development plan for staff members, implementing the plan, and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan; and (c) facilitating a group toward solution of a problem. The content assessment consists of 80 multiple-choice questions and two constructed response items. The focus of this "content" assessment is centered on the Missouri Leader Standards. A student must receive a passing grade on this test, as well as the performance tasks to receive certification.

Cohort Models

Collaborative Principal Preparation Program

The initial effort to begin a cohort-based preparation program began by contacting several Kansas City area suburban superintendents regarding a leadership development effort for potential leaders in their districts. Several of the faculty members from UCM's Educational Leadership department met with six Kansas City suburban superintendents on several occasions

throughout the fall of 2001 to discuss this new initiative. In January 2002, the superintendents of the six districts endorsed the program. Initial efforts also secured an implementation grant from the Wallace Foundation through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) has added additional districts over the years and now includes 14 Kansas City area school districts.

In developing the CPPP, consideration has been given to the areas of concern regarding traditional preparation programs and the growing need for quality administrative candidates to fill projected vacancies. The program incorporated district-selected educators, a cohort model of instruction, mentoring, embedded practicum experiences, and high-quality professional development. District liaisons (usually assistant superintendents either primarily responsible for human resources or academic achievement) are appointed by their superintendents to work with the coordinator of the CPPP to review the program and to offer insights and recommendations on the curriculum. The school and university personnel work together toward the joint goal of providing a program that enables graduates to enter into administration in their districts prepared to lead. These administrators also provide district approval for a candidate's participation in the program. Additionally, the district liaisons work with the program coordinator to assure that each candidate is paired with an appropriate building-level school leader who will serve as the candidate's mentor throughout the program.

Teaching responsibilities are primarily the responsibility of full-time faculty, but a few courses are taught by current, district-level leaders from CPPP school districts. All courses are offered at the Lee's Summit, Missouri campus to allow students to complete their program close to their home districts. Students enter, progress through, and complete the program as a cohort over the course of two years (six consecutive semesters). For the last decade, there have been enough students to have an elementary and a secondary cohort move through concurrently. Since its inception in 2002, 425 students have participated in the Collaborative Principal Preparation Program. Since 2009, 216 students have entered the program (not counting those currently in the program) and 214 of these individuals graduated. There are currently 136 CPPP graduates serving in leadership positions. Table 1 lists the cohorts, number of participating school districts, and number of individuals in each cohort.

Table 1
UCM Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) Cohorts

Year	Number of Districts Involved	Number of Participants
2002–2004	6	17
2004–2006	7	16
2005–2007	6	16
2006–2008	8	30
2007–2009	14	31
2008–2010	14	34
2009–2011	14	30
2010–2012	15	34

Table 1 Continued
UCM Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) Cohorts

2011–2013	15	25
2012–2014	14	27
2013–2015	14	34
2014–2016	14	34
2015–2017	14	32
2016–2018*	14	27
2017–2019*	14	38
Total		**425**

Note. Not yet complete

Many students who graduate from the CPPP may not step immediately into a leadership role. They may be still perfecting their skills in the classroom and are enjoying that challenge or do not feel like personally this is the best time for them to move into a position that requires a greater time commitment or a longer contract. However, those who are ready to increase their responsibilities have had phenomenal success in being selected as instructional coaches or administrators. The close working relationships with cooperating school districts may be part of the reason. The CPPP graduates were approved by their district to participate initially; they were assigned mentors selected by their district; and their respective districts had input into the type of experiences they would have at UCM. The students, therefore, have had a customized program that positions them to lead in their district, thus making them better prepared candidates.

Rural Leadership

Working from the successful implementation of the CPPP, UCM faculty members implemented a similar project, Rural Leadership Preparation Program (RLPP), with area rural schools. The project included planning sessions with area school leaders and orientation sessions with prospective students. These efforts led to the initial establishment of two cohorts of rural educators.

Unlike the CPPP, the RLPP included both district-selected candidates and self-selected candidates. Administrators from the rural districts were asked to identify staff members within their schools who had the potential to become educational leaders. Each district developed its own procedure for identifying candidates for the program and encouraging participation in the RLPP. The primary focus of the degree program was on the preparation of school leaders, including teacher leaders, working in rural school districts. Emphasis in all the coursework and job-embedded activities revolved around rural education issues and needs.

The initial cohorts consisted of 11 students at each site. The Butler cohort included eight students from Butler schools, and three additional students from other area schools. The Clinton cohort included five students from Clinton, and six students from four other districts. Classes were held at the rural school sites in 2007 to 2009. Of these 22 students, six have assumed leadership positions. A similar cohort of 19 students is currently in progress at Marshall, MO, and will complete the program in May 2018.

Urban Leadership

UCM, in partnership with its public charter schools in Kansas City, has completed two cohorts of students participating in its urban leadership preparation program. This preparation program was geared specifically for educators working in UCM-sponsored charter schools. The urban leadership program was developed to better prepare future school leaders for the unique demands of urban education. All coursework and activities are relevant and meaningful to the leadership and management of urban schools. "Job-embedded" activities are incorporated throughout the coursework to give students the opportunity to work with "real world" situations and issues. Additionally, only instructors with urban experience and expertise have been selected to teach the courses, including successful practitioners from urban districts.

The cohort model provides flexibility and support for the students. Scheduling and advisement are built into the model, bringing these services to the students. Additionally, students work with faculty members to develop a schedule and delivery model for upcoming courses. The majority of the courses have been in the traditional format, but have also included hybrid and online courses. These accommodations help support graduate students working in urban school settings, often characterized by high stress and demanding time restraints.

The urban program was made possible by a number of partnerships between the charter schools, the College of Education, the Graduate School, and the Midwest Center for Charter Schools and Urban Education. School leaders were vital in the recruitment and selection of students for the program. Additionally, selected school leaders have participated as "guest lecturers" to share their expertise and experiences. Students also receive financial support. The Midwest Center for Charter Schools and Urban Education provided "tuition" for four of the required classes, basically "reinvesting" a portion of the funds generated by charter school enrollment back to the schools. These classes are designed to support the school improvement mandates embedded in the charter school concept.

Fourteen students, all urban educators working at UCM-sponsored charter schools, completed the program in December 2012. Since that time, five of these 14 have assumed leadership roles within their schools. A second cohort of 13 charter school educators completed the program December 2015, with one of these students moving into a leadership role.

Key Aspects of UCM's Cohort Programs

Recruitment

The cohort-based school leader preparation programs addressed the lack of quality candidates in the schools by having the school district administration identify potential leaders, allowing the school districts to tap a talent pool within each of their districts. According to the Wallace Foundation (2012), the process used for candidate training should be selective to create a more capable and diverse group of future principals. Staff members who receive training and additional responsibility are able to determine if they are suited for administrative positions. It also allows the principal to observe the candidates to determine if they are suited for leadership

positions. In addition, it allows the teachers to practice their new skills in a safe, secure environment with the support of the current administration.

The benefits of "grow your own" programs have been noted for some time. Peterson and Kelly (2001) reviewed the findings of the Grow Your Own Principals program in Madison, Wisconsin, which was a cooperative effort between the school district and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The district found that graduates from the Grow Your Own program had a good understanding of the district operations and were able to transition easily into administrative positions within the district. In 2011, six districts launched the Principal Pipeline Initiative with the hope to establish a consistent "pipeline" of effective school leaders. Initial results are positive. Additional research is being conducted by tracking school leaders who emerged from the program (Wallace Foundation, 2015).

Collaboration

To enhance the collaboration between the school districts and UCM an instructional leadership team was established for each of the cohort programs. The instructional leadership team consists of faculty members from UCM and district administrators from participating districts. The team met on a regular basis through the programs. The team met at the beginning of each semester to review the program of study, to get an update on the progress of the program from the instructors, and to provide feedback to the UCM staff on their perceptions of the program.

Cohort Composition

The students all began their program at the same time and worked and grew together as a learning community throughout the six semesters of the programs. According to Norris, Barnett, Basom, and Yorkers (1996), cohorts that operate as true groups are characterized by four important qualities: interaction, purpose, interdependence, and individual growth. The cohort structure allows students the opportunity to learn from each other, develop friendships that will support them throughout the program, and provide them a professional network that will be advantageous to them throughout their professional careers.

Program Structure

The delivery of the programs included a variety of formats. The majority of the courses, two each semester, were delivered at the rural school site. The CPPP suburban cohorts incorporate two courses taught in one evening (5:00 & 7:30), the RLPP classes were delivered in eight-week blocks, one course at a time; and the urban cohort included a combination of 8-week courses and online delivery. The Marshall cohort classes were primarily delivered face to face, with a few online courses.

Faculty Participation

The composition of the faculty in educational programs is also a topic of discussion in the literature. In an AASA survey, the top action step universities could take to improve their

principal preparation programs was to have most or all of their courses taught by current or former effective principals (Wallace Foundation, 2016). The educational leadership professors at UCM have extensive backgrounds in public schools, allowing them to address practical experience along with theory. While the use of adjunct professors has some potential benefits, it was the goal of the UCM faculty that the cohorts be primarily instructed by regular faculty members. Of the seven faculty members in the Educational Leadership program, all have taught classes for one or more of the cohort groups.

Faculty participation is the "glue" that connects the students' experiences and learning obtained during specific courses of the program. Without having full-time faculty members who are aware of the student experiences from beginning to end, much of the benefit of the cohort model would be minimized. With full-time faculty members working with the students at multiple points during the program of study, learning experiences can be referred to, built upon, and utilized throughout the preparation program. By being aware of the common experiences of the students, faculty can connect the different courses and learning experiences in a cohesive and meaningful manner.

Real-World Application

An AACTE survey identified strong clinical experiences as the top essential element in preparing strong principals (Wallace Foundation, 2016). The study also noted barriers universities face in achieving this key element. These include identifying high-quality mentors, developing partnerships with districts, as well as time and financial restraints. In most cases, the candidate is a full-time educator and working to complete the required internship hours.

The UCM School Administration degree program has an internship component in which students work with mentors within their district for two semesters. This internship experience occurs toward the end of their program and has been a very strong component of the program. It is the intent of the programs to expand upon this type of experience so students can incorporate components of the internship throughout their course work. Another responsibility of the instructional leadership team is to recommend ways in which students can experience job-embedded learning throughout the six semesters of their program.

Administrators, mentors, and students noted many advantages for incorporating job-embedded activities into the administrator preparation program. Among the advantages mentioned were: practical experiences, which supported the theory discussed in classes, chances for employment were greater because administrators were able to directly observe and work with administrative candidates, it broadened the student's understanding of the principal's role, and students would seek administrative positions sooner than originally planned as a result of participating in the programs.

Looking Ahead

Missouri's educational landscape has been negatively impacted by the recent economic recession and subsequent years of lower state revenues for both PK-12 and higher education. Most districts, as well as institutions of higher education, have cut programs, increased class

sizes, and reduced their professional development budgets. A pattern that particularly impacted leadership programs has been the reduction of many intermediate positions such as instructional coaches and administrative interns, often providing the first step into future leadership positions.

Missouri's education policy trends have also been influenced by a reform ideology. State legislation, influenced by recommendations from their respective state Boards of Education, has caused constant changes in academic standards for students in PK-12 schools over the past several years. There has been controversy over state standards for education, as well as standards for the preparation of educators.

Missouri has also witnessed recent trends to make the evaluation of individual educators and school systems a priority within their public education accountability systems. Districts and individual school sites are evaluated with an Annual Performance Report, a numerical system of rating and ranking public schools in Missouri. Missouri has also recently implemented a new system for evaluating teachers and principals.

These reform measures have not been limited to PK-12 schools. Missouri's educator preparation programs are now being held accountable by the State Board of Education via a published Annual Performance Report (APR). The APR includes program admission-completion rates, student grade point averages, pass rates on the state assessments for certification, and first year principal survey results (DESE, 2016). As institutions react to these new mandates, a perceived value to the cohort model is the ability to coordinate and reinforce efforts to improve these data sets. For example, the CPPP has incorporated the State's Performance Tasks within a number of its courses, providing students with a system of seamless support as students progress from one semester to the next, culminating with the submission of the tasks during the students' internship course. While the initial results are not yet public, CPPP students have reported successful pass rates on both the performance tasks and the new content test.

This paper describes some of the practices being employed with respect to the UCM cohort programs. Although leading in today's schools is more difficult than ever because of a range of issues including societal needs, high-takes testing, and decreased funding for education; it is interesting to note that many of the significant challenges continue to be the same through the years and across the different cohort programs. Much of what has been found in other cohort studies has been reinforced within the UCM principal preparation cohorts, but more remains to be learned to know how to design and deliver a model for prospective school leaders that serves the diverse needs of school leaders in rural, suburban, and urban schools.

References

Norris, C., Barnett, B., Basom, M., & Yerkes, D. (1996). The cohort: A model for developing transformational leadership. *Theory Into Practice*, *27*(3/4), 146-164.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). *Professional standards for educational leaders*. Retrieved from http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2015/ProfessionalStandardsforEducationalLeaders2015 forNPBEAFINAL.pdf

Orphanos, S., & Orr, M. T. (2014). Learning leadership matters: The influence of innovative school leadership preparation on teachers' experiences and outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *42*(5), 680-700.

Peterson, K., & Kelley, C. (2001, January/February). Transforming school leadership. *Leadership*, *30*(3), 8-11.

Tirozzi, G. (2001). The artistry of leadership: The evolving role of the secondary school principal. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *82*(6), 434-349.

University of Central Missouri. (2016). *The University of Central Missouri: Fast facts*. Retrieved from https://www.ucmo.edu/about/facts/

Wallace Foundation. (2012). *The making of the principal: Five lessons in leadership training*. Retrieved from http://www.wallacefoundation.org

Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. Retrieved from http://www.wallacefoundation.org

Wallace Foundation. (2015). *Improving university principal preparation programs: Five themes from the field*. Retrieved from http://www.wallacefoundation.org