

Appendix A. Western State Report

Can School Leaders Lead?

A Study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the American Institutes for Research

I. Introduction

In the western state, 12 principals from two urban public school districts were interviewed to determine (a) how they characterized effective school leadership, (b) the degree to which they felt they were able to exercise effective school leadership as they perceived it, (c) the barriers to leadership they perceived along with sources of those barriers, and (d) the skills they believed today's principals needed to be effective leaders. All principals were from elementary schools within two urban districts (W-District 1 and W-District 2) from the northern and southern parts of the state. Six district-operated public school principals were interviewed from each of these two districts. Among the two districts, it is important to note that some barriers to principal leadership were held in common, while others seemed to be based on their respective district's theory of action for change and improvement and/or context factors.

W-District 1 used a "managed-instruction" theory of action in which the district was committed to a centrally determined instructional model and instructional and staffing approach that was applied to all schools. This type of management places the control at the district level, and the district, in turn, is responsible for supporting staff, curriculum, and the organization of each school. In this model, all services and supports are focused on a "one best" instructional model. The district's response to low-performing schools is to intensify resources and supervision in order to achieve fidelity to the model. In sum, W-District 1 controlled the methods and means by which the schools were to meet state standards.

W-District 2 used a portfolio or performance empowerment theory of action. In this theory of action, the district sets standards, ensures equity, builds capacity, and holds schools accountable. Significant authority is located at the school (principal) level, and

there is a general commitment by the district to manage a portfolio of instructional models and academic programs from which schools can choose. The district increases involvement in low-performing schools, as determined by the schools' performance on outcome measures. Differentiated decision making between the district and the schools is valued in this type of system, and school leaders are expected to make decisions based on their students' needs. Under the portfolio theory of action, district involvement in schools grows, and school-level discretion is limited for those schools that do not meet the outcome measure expectations. This means that low-performing schools have the least autonomy and high-performing schools having the most. W-District 2 principals had greater flexibility to make decisions than those in W-District 1. However, W-District 2 principals from low-performing schools had less flexibility.

In addition to differences in the theory of action employed by each district, local context is a factor. For example, in both districts, principals had concerns about staffing. However, the reasons for these concerns were different because of the context in which principals were working. Much of the context discussed was attributed to the district.

In W-District 1, principals were concerned about staffing. The concerns centered on principals' ability to influence the more experienced teachers to work within the parameters of the district-determined curriculum and instructional methods. Again, the union contract's seniority clause made it difficult for principals to discharge teachers with more seniority in cases when these teachers were less committed, motivated, and skilled to function in such a prescriptive (in terms of instructional methods and curriculum) climate.

In W-District 2, a decrease in enrollment led to a reduction in the budget, which forced the district to close schools. Closing schools, in turn, contributed to staffing issues. Because the union contract had a teacher and school consolidation provision, teachers with seniority had first choice of any job openings. Principals found that this (a) eliminated any opportunity to make new hires, (b) disrupted the school's culture, and (c) sometimes resulted in inheriting some experienced teachers who were not a good

match for the school. W-District 2 principals felt that their hands were tied regarding this matter.

II. Characteristics of Principals Interviewed

Twelve district-operated public school principals from W-Districts 1 and 2 were interviewed. Both districts are considered urban. All principals led elementary schools ranging from Grades K–3 to K–8. Fifty-eight percent of the principals interviewed were female and 42% were male. Most of the principals were between 35 and 64 years old (Table 1). Eighty-three percent of the principals were White/Caucasian X. Seventeen percent of the principals were Asian. On average, the principals had 10.6 years of experience as principals, 7.6 of which were in their current district. The range in years of experience was from 4 to 26 years as a principal, with an average of 10.6 years (Table 2). Only three of the principals had experience teaching in the district in which they currently held the position of principal, and in W-District 1 none of the principals had experience teaching in the district. On average, the principals had 12.8 years of experience teaching (inside and outside of their current district) (Table 2). Eighty-three percent of the principals held a master’s degree. One principal had a specialist degree, and one principal held a doctorate).

Table 1 Average Age of Principals Interviewed

Age Range	% of Principals
65–74	8.33%
55–64	33.33%
45–54	16.67%
35–44	33.33%
25–34	8.33%

Table 2 Average Years of Experience as Administrators and Teachers of Principals Interviewed

Years of Experience	As Principal	As Administrator (not Principal)	As Teacher
Total	10.6	1.6	12.8
District	8.2	0.0	4.9
School	6.7	0.0	1.8

Table 3 Educational Attainment of Principals Interviewed

Educational Attainment	% of Principals
Master's Degree	83.3%
Specialist Certification	8.3%
Doctorate (PhD/EdD)	8.3%

Exciting and *challenging* are the words that principals used to describe their job. The exciting part of their job included learning new things, creatively solving problems, and seeing students grow personally and academically. The challenging aspect of their job was synthesizing all of the demands placed on them from the different school constituencies (district, students, teachers, parents, community) they served into a functioning school that allowed for high levels of student achievement.

The principals in W-District 1 saw their key responsibilities in terms of ensuring student progress in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). They focused on implementing appropriate curriculum strategies, ensuring that support systems were in place for students, and supporting and encouraging teachers by helping them implement the district curriculum.

In W-District 2, principals felt their key responsibilities were to support teachers in providing outstanding instruction and ensure the school is a safe environment for students and teachers. By removing obstacles to teaching, building teachers' professional capacity, protecting teachers' time, using positive acknowledgement and recognition to validate teachers, empowering teachers as leaders, and monitoring teacher performance, principals in W-District 2 believed their ultimate goal of high academic achievement for all students would be reached.

Principals from both districts felt that support for teachers was essential. However, the approach to and strategies for supporting teachers were different. In the managed-instruction district (W-District 1), principals wanted to ensure implementation fidelity to the district curriculum, whereas in the portfolio district (W-District 2), principals felt they

had to clear obstacles for teachers so that they would be free to teach to the best of their ability.

The external expectations for principals in both districts were concentrated on raising student achievement. Principals had a variety of approaches to responding to external expectations, but student performance as it contributed to the school's performance was the bottom line. In W-District 1, although there were variations in responses, all principals were able to clearly articulate two primary goals as mandated by the district: (a) all students must progress one level each year in the state test; and (b) English language learners will not fall behind and will show growth within 4 to 5 years. In W-District 2, most principals clearly understood that the district evaluated their performance according to whether students met academic performance targets and showed improvements in test scores, and whether teachers decreased student achievement gaps and employed appropriate student discipline practices. A district's involvement with its principals lessened if a school was meeting targets moving toward high-performance levels. In contrast, principals of schools that did not meet performance targets explained that the district provided additional supervision, resources, and specialists to work with the school, resulting in less flexibility.

III. School Characteristics

The principals of the 12 district-operated public schools in the western state served 6,802 students¹ in grades K–8. There was one K–3 grade school, five K–5 grade schools, five K–6 grade schools, and one K–8 school.

School Demographics

On average, 60% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Twelve percent of students were receiving special education services, and 49% of students were limited English proficient (Table 4).

¹ Enrollment calculations are based on all students within the school, therefore school demographic information in the one K–8 school will encompass elementary and middle school grades.

Table 4 Demographics of Urban Public (Non-Charter) Schools

	Enrollment*	# of Students per grade	% Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	% of Special Education	% of Limited English Proficient	Per-Pupil Expenditure
Average	567	87	60%	12%	49%	\$ 6,952
Total	6,802					

* Enrollment calculations are based on all students within the school, therefore school demographic information in the one K–8 school will encompass elementary and middle school grades.

There were approximately 19.7 students per teacher. Teachers in these schools had an average of 11.8 years of experience and 10.6 median years of experience. The average years of teaching experience in the schools ranged from 9 to 16. There were approximately three novice teachers per school. The two low-performing schools reported fewer than the average number of novice teachers, although the teachers in these schools in general had less teaching experience. The average percentage of teacher turnover in the schools was 10.4%, with the highest turnover in a single school being 30% (Table 5).

Table 5 District-Operated Public School Teacher Information

	# of Students per Teacher	# of Teachers per Grade	Teacher Years of Experience	# of Novice Teachers	# of Teacher Dismissals (2004–2005)	% of Teacher Turnover
Average	19.7	4.4	11.8	3.4	0.2	10.4%

School Status

For the purposes of this study, principals were sought from schools in one of three relative performance categories: high performing, average performing, and low performing. The states’ school rating systems were fitted into these three categories so that comparisons across the three states that were part of this study could be made. The actual state designations are being withheld to maintain states’ anonymity.

Table 6 sorts the schools overseen by each principal into one of the three school status categories. There are three high-performing schools, seven average-performing schools,

and two low-performing schools. Not included in the table is the charter school, which is considered average performing.

Table 6 School Designations

School Status Category	Report Designation
High Performing	3
Average Performing*	7
Low Performing	2

* The one charter school is designated as “average,” but is not included in this list of non-charter public schools.

IV. Constraints on Leadership

Approximately 50% of the principals interviewed indicated that their actions to raise student achievement were “somewhat constrained” by outside forces. Particular areas that the majority of principals stated needing more control over were staffing (hiring, firing, transferring), instructional time, program adoption decisions, and parental involvement levels. The principals identified union contracts, district policy, and state laws and regulations as the primary forces constraining their ability to raise student achievement. However, despite these challenges, all of the principals indicated that they had a “strong ability” (58.3%) or “somewhat of an ability” (41.7%) to exercise effective leadership.

Interestingly, when these numbers were disaggregated by the number of years of experience they had within the district, the more experienced principals were more likely (though slightly) to feel less constrained than their less-experienced counterparts. Supporting this finding in at least one case, a principal who had been in the district for much longer than 20 years described knowing the right people in the district as an important factor to her ability to make things “happen” within her school.

School status also made a difference in the principal’s feelings of constraint. Principals in the higher-performing schools felt less constrained than those in average-performing schools (Table 7). As for the low-performing schools, one principal indicated that he was not at all constrained, and the other indicated that she was somewhat constrained. This difference may be attributed to the newness of the first principal who felt not at all

constrained. The principal was placed in a chronically low-performing school to turn it around and was empowered by the district to do what was needed to accomplish a successful turnaround.

Table 7 How Much Principals Felt Their Actions to Raise Student Achievement Were Constrained by Outside Forces

	Not at all Constrained	Not Very Constrained	Somewhat Constrained	Very Constrained
WESTERN STATE (n=12)				
All public school principals interviewed (n=12)	16.67%	33.33%	50.00%	0%
YEARS IN DISTRICT				
Principals who have been in the district for less than 20 years (n=9)	22.2%	22.2%	55.6%	0%
Principals who have been in the district for 20 or more years (n=3)	0%	66.7%	33.3%	0%
SCHOOL STATUS				
Principals of schools that are high performing (n=3)	0%	66.7%	33.3%	0%
Principals of schools that are average performing (n=7)	14.3%	28.6%	57.1%	0%
Principals of schools that are low performing (n=2)	50.0%	0%	50.0%	0%

Table 8 shows that the difference between principals who were in the district for less than 20 years and those who were in the district for more than 20 years is small. On the other hand, the difference between principals in higher- and lower-performing school status is greater. All principals of high-performing schools felt they had a “strong ability” to exercise effective school leadership, and the responses were mixed for the lower-performing school principals.

Table 8 How Principals Rated Their Overall Ability to Exercise Effective Leadership

	Strong Ability	Somewhat of an Ability	Somewhat Unable	Strongly Unable
WESTERN STATE (n=12)				
All public school principals interviewed (n=12)	58.33%	41.67%	0%	0%
YEARS IN DISTRICT				
Principals who have been in the district for less than 20 years (n=9)	55.6%	44.4%	0%	0%
Principals who have been in the district for 20 or more years (n=3)	66.7%	33.3%	0%	0%
SCHOOL STATUS				
Principals of schools that are high performing (n=3)	100%	0%	0%	0%
Principals of schools that are average performing (n=7)	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%
Principals of schools that are low performing (n=2)	50.0%	50.0%	0%	0%

Table 9 shows the degree of importance principals placed in 21 functional areas and the degree of autonomy the principals had over these particular areas. Staffing issues were on the top of every principal’s list and it was these same issues that had the most discrepancy between the amount of autonomy the principals felt was necessary to effectively lead their schools and their actual (low level) of autonomy. All principals indicated that it was very important to have influence over hiring and discharging unsuitable teachers. Nearly all principals indicated that it is very important to their ability as leaders to be able to assign teachers (91.7%) and transfer unsuitable teachers (83.3%). In these same staffing areas, most principals felt they had less autonomy than they actually needed in the areas of hiring, transferring, and dismissing staff (more than 50% indicating “not so much” or “no” autonomy).

Table 9 Perceived Need for Versus Actual Autonomy of Principals Interviewed

Function	Perceived Importance to Effectiveness as a School Leader				How Much Autonomy Principal Currently Has (Actual)			
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not so Important	Not at all Important	Great Deal of Autonomy	Some Autonomy	Not so Much Autonomy	No Autonomy
1 Number/type of faculty and staff	50.00%	33.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	25.00%	41.67%
2 Allocating resources	58.33%	41.67%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	50.00%	33.33%	0.00%
3 Hiring	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	41.67%	50.00%	0.00%
4 Teacher pay or bonuses	8.33%	25.00%	58.33%	8.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
5 Assigning teachers	91.67%	8.33%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	50.00%	8.33%	8.33%
6 Transferring unsuitable teachers	83.33%	8.33%	0.00%	8.33%	0.00%	8.33%	41.67%	50.00%
7 Discharging unsuitable teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	41.67%	50.00%
8 Assigning noninstructional duties	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	16.67%	41.67%	33.33%	8.33%
9 Teacher and student schedules	41.67%	50.00%	8.33%	0.00%	25.00%	58.33%	8.33%	8.33%
10 Controlling school calendar	16.67%	58.33%	25.00%	0.00%	16.67%	25.00%	25.00%	33.33%
11 Allocating time for instruction	58.33%	33.33%	8.33%	0.00%	8.33%	25.00%	41.67%	25.00%
12 Determining extracurricular activities	33.33%	58.33%	8.33%	0.00%	41.67%	50.00%	0.00%	8.33%
13 Program adoption decisions	58.33%	25.00%	16.67%	0.00%	8.33%	16.67%	8.33%	66.67%
14 Curriculum pacing and sequencing	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	8.33%	0.00%	66.67%	25.00%
15 Methods and materials	58.33%	33.33%	8.33%	0.00%	16.67%	16.67%	58.33%	8.33%
16 Student discipline policies/procedures	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	66.67%	8.33%	0.00%
17 Controlling student dress	25.00%	25.00%	33.33%	16.67%	41.67%	41.67%	16.67%	0.00%
18 Parental involvement requirements	41.67%	33.33%	16.67%	8.33%	8.33%	33.33%	8.33%	50.00%
19 Time spent on instructional versus operational issues	91.67%	8.33%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	50.00%	25.00%	0.00%
20 Controlling the school facility	66.67%	25.00%	8.33%	0.00%	58.33%	41.67%	0.00%	0.00%
21 Engaging in private fundraising	8.33%	25.00%	58.33%	8.33%	41.67%	33.33%	8.33%	16.67%

V. Principals’ Influence Over School Functions

Table 10 prioritizes school leadership functional areas that principals identified based on the size of the difference between the perceived need for influence over the area versus the actual amount of influence the principals have. Areas with a higher, positive difference denote more serious gaps between what principals believed was necessary for

them to be effective school leaders and the limitations from outside forces that they perceived.

Table 10 Perceived Need for Effective School Versus Actual Influence of Principals Interviewed

Function	Function is "Very" or "Somewhat" Important to Effective School Leadership	Currently Have a "Great Deal" of "Some" Autonomy	<i>Difference Between Importance of Autonomy Less Actual Autonomy</i>
Discharging unsuitable teachers	100.0%	8.3%	91.7%
Transferring unsuitable teachers	91.7%	8.3%	83.3%
Allocating time for instruction	91.7%	33.3%	58.3%
Methods and materials	91.7%	33.3%	58.3%
Program adoption decisions	83.3%	25.0%	58.3%
Curriculum pacing and sequencing	66.7%	8.3%	58.3%
Hiring	100.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Number/type of faculty and staff	83.3%	33.3%	50.0%
Allocating resources	100.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Controlling school calendar	75.0%	41.7%	33.3%
Parental involvement requirements	75.0%	41.7%	33.3%
Teacher pay or bonuses	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%
Time spent on instructional versus operational issues	100.0%	75.0%	25.0%
Assigning teachers	100.0%	83.3%	16.7%
Teacher and student schedules	91.7%	83.3%	8.3%
Student discipline policies/procedures	100.0%	91.7%	8.3%
Assigning noninstructional duties	66.7%	58.3%	8.3%
Determining extracurricular activities	91.7%	91.7%	0.0%
Controlling the school facility	91.7%	100.0%	-8.3%
Controlling student dress	50.0%	83.3%	-33.3%
Engaging in private fundraising	33.3%	75.0%	-41.7%

The differences between perceived need for and actual influence in: (a) staffing; (b) time allocation for instruction; (c) decisions over methods, materials, and program adoption; and (d) curriculum pacing and sequencing rise to the top of the list. Staffing issues have the greatest discrepancy between the perceived need and actual influence. Discharge and transferring unsuitable teachers and staff show the greatest disparity, a limitation that principals attributed to union contracts and district policies. In both districts, the union contracts had seniority clauses, which permit teachers who have been in the district the

longest to have the first option of any positions open within the schools. Principals felt constrained by this policy because it did not always allow them to select the best candidate for the job opening.

District policies were different among the two districts. However, both sets of policies resulted in limiting the autonomy the principals have over staffing. In W-District 1, principals were pressured to implement district-determined curriculum and instructional strategies and felt this demand conflicted with the styles of the veteran teachers who were accustomed to controlling their own classrooms. The district policy challenged principals to “win over” the veteran teachers. In W-District 2, the district policy of shutting down schools or “school consolidation” flooded the system with teachers with seniority. Teachers from the consolidated schools were given first preference on any vacancies within the district. Therefore, principals believe they were constrained in their ability to find the best candidate for the available positions. Also, teachers with more seniority who came from other schools within the district in large numbers proved to be disruptive to the culture of the school and impeded some of the school improvement efforts that were beginning to take hold within a school.

Limitation to “allocating time for instruction” is attributed to state policy. According to the western state’s education code, schools are required to provide a minimum number of educational minutes per school year dependent upon a student’s grade level. Additionally, there are specific subject requirements (e.g., physical education, English language development instructional minutes). These requirements, combined with limitations to the amount of time teachers were able to work as determined by union contracts, proved problematic for principals because they limited principals’ flexibility to respond to the specific needs of the students within their schools. Furthermore, in W-District 2, principals whose schools were received federal Reading First grant funds were “burdened” by the grant requirements’ highly regimented time demands, which added to the difficulty in meeting the state and district demands for instructional minutes and balancing these demands with the limited amount of allowable work hours for teachers (as determined by the union contract).

Curriculum pacing, program adoption decisions, and methods and materials are topics of concern in both districts. It is somewhat surprising that both districts would identify similar issues because of the different theories of action used to manage each of the districts. In W-District 1 (the managed-instruction district), control over these functions was centralized and closely controlled by the district. Principals were responsible for appropriately implementing curriculum and programs and using the right methods and materials. In W-District 2 (the “portfolio” managed district), decisions about such issues were technically left in the hands of the principals. However, the degree to which principals had the freedom to make these decisions is (in most cases) correlated to schools’ performance on outcome measures. The highest performing principals felt they had autonomy over these decisions, while the average- and lower-performing school principals felt they had less autonomy. Also, in W-District 2, textbooks that aligned with the state standards had been chosen for the schools, and many principals believed they were required to adhere to the curriculum and pacing dictated by these textbooks.

The leadership context of each school was created in part by the characteristics of the principal and the needs of the school. The autonomy data were examined to see if differences in the number of years of experience a principal possessed or school status influenced principals’ perceptions of their ability to exert effective school leadership.

Figures 1 through 3 categorize the principals’ perceptions of their autonomy based on three different categories. First, the data were categorized by the number of years of experience principals have working in their current district in any capacity (teacher, administrator, principal) (Figure 1). Principals were categorized as “experienced educators” (principal with less than 20 years of experience working in the district) or as “highly experienced educators” (principal with 20 or more years of experience working in the district). Second, principals were placed into two categories based on the total number of years they served as a principal (Figure 2). The principals were either “new principals” (principals with 10 or less years of experience) or “veteran principals” (principals with more than 10 years of experience). Last, the principal responses were

divided into three categories based on the status of the schools they lead (Figure 3) based on the state performance designation: high performing, average performing, and low performing.

In the western state, there were nine principals who were experienced educators within the district (less than 20 years), and three principals who were highly experienced educators within the district (20 or more years). Figure 1 illustrates the differences in perceived influence among those principals. The areas in which highly experienced educators in the district had more autonomy than those who were newer to the district include: hiring, assigning noninstructional duties, determining teacher and student schedules, determining methods and materials, and engaging in private fundraising. The interviews revealed that the more experienced principals felt a certain degree of comfort in maneuvering through the politics of the district. These highly experienced principals described being active in the community and knowing the “right people” in the district as important elements of their success. In interviews, principals with the most experience said that some of the functions and/or barriers to controlling these functions could be “overcome” because they either knew how to work the system or they had relationships in the right places within the district, giving them an informal sense of autonomy over these issues. This factor increased their influence over some of the district decisions and also gave them opportunity to seek out approval for special exceptions to district policies.

There were also some areas in which those who had less experience felt they had more autonomy. These include: assigning teachers, controlling the school calendar, and setting parental involvement requirements. The reasons for these differences are less clear. It may be that the principals interviewed simply took more initiative in these areas and were less accepting of the status quo.

Figure 1 Perceived Autonomy of Principals, by Level of Experience Within the District

Functional Areas in which the Western State Principals Perceive they have a "GREAT DEAL OF" or "SOME" AUTONOMY", by Level of Experience in the District

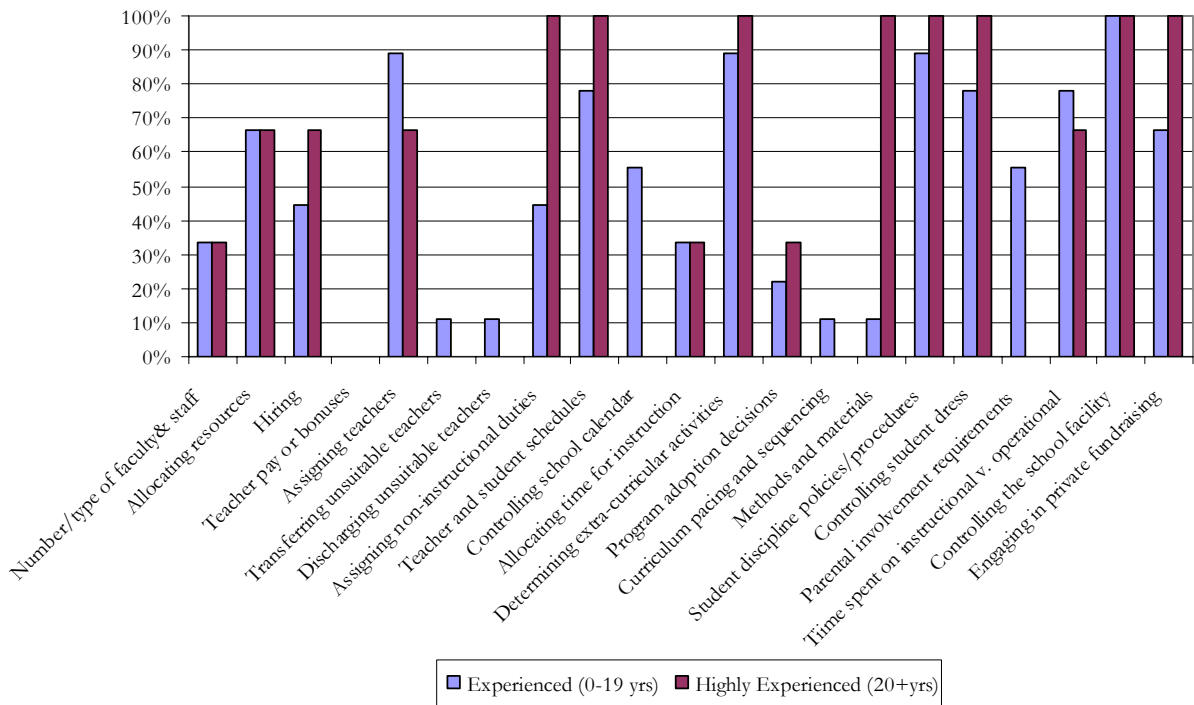
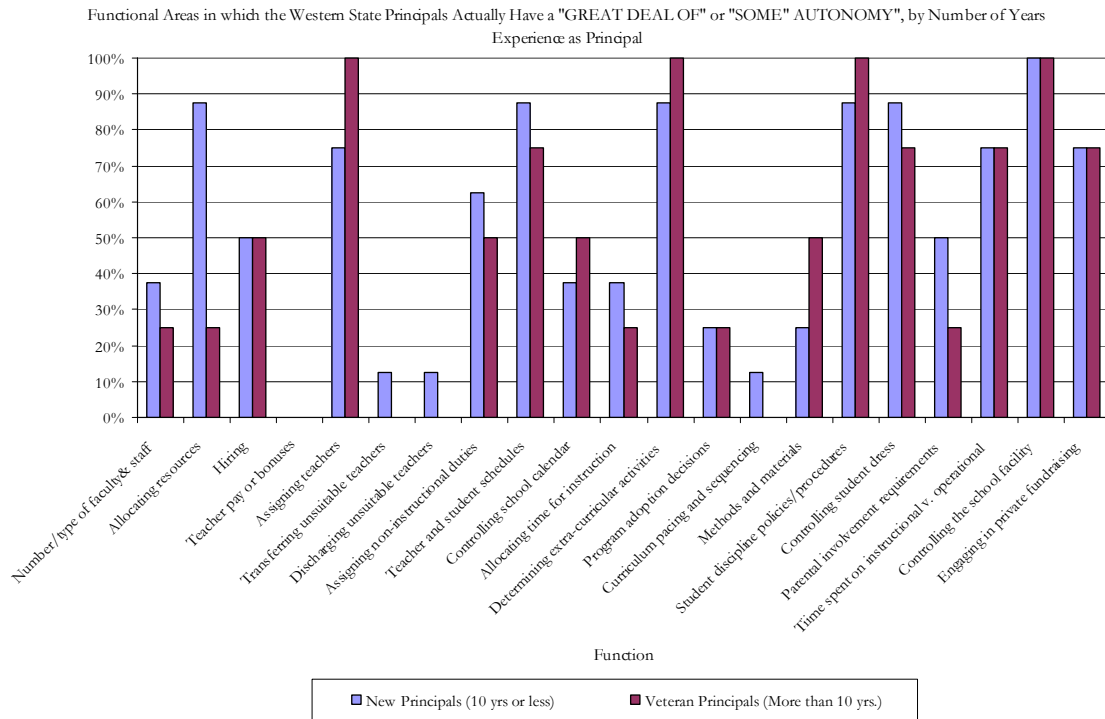


Figure 2 shows the difference in perceived autonomy amongst principals based on their number of years of experience in that capacity. There were eight principals who had 10 years or less experience as principals (new principals) and four who had more than 10 years of experience as principals (veteran principals). Veteran principals felt they had more autonomy over assigning teachers and determining methods and materials, while new principals felt they had more autonomy over allocating resources and setting parental involvement requirements. An explanation for these differences may be that veteran principals had more experience overseeing teachers (including teachers with seniority) and had a better understanding of (or a resignation to) the culture of the school district. Although we are not certain why this is, we can speculate that the newer principals most likely had been trained in recent years and perhaps their stronger sense of influence over allocating resources in the areas that they deem a priority and their influence over parental involvement strategies may have influenced their feeling of autonomy over these

functional areas. Further research is necessary to determine whether these explanations are connected to these findings.

Figure 2 Perceived Autonomy of Principals, by Number of Years of Experience as Principals



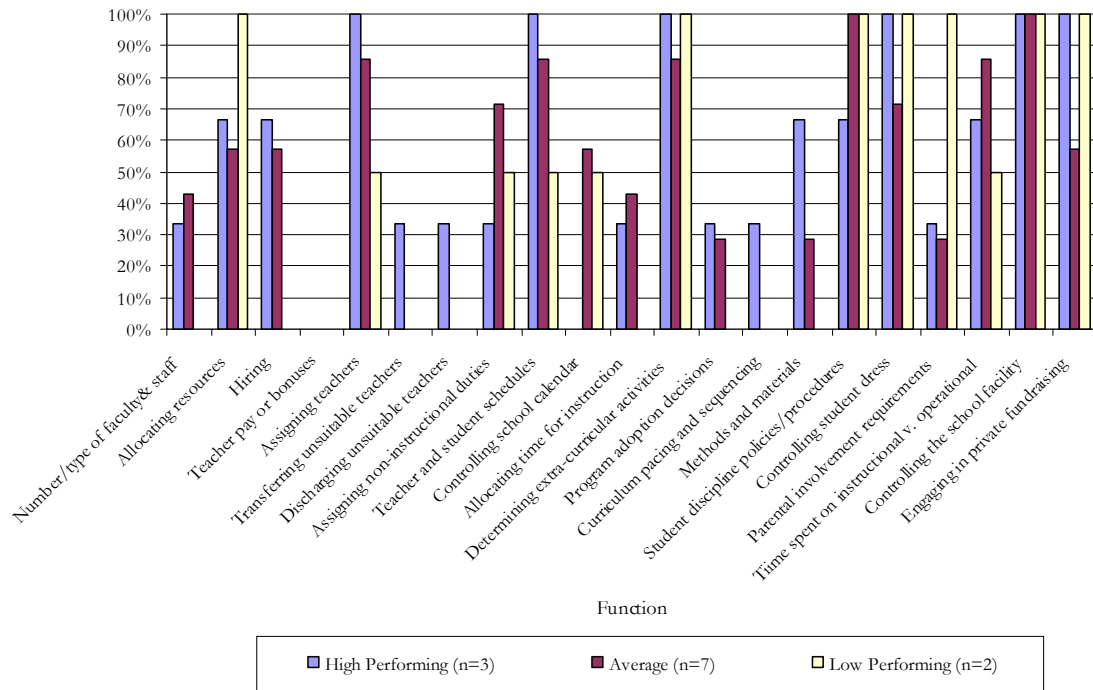
VII. The Effect of School Status on Perceived Influence of Principals

Figure 3 shows the differences among principals' perceived influence based on the performance level of the schools (high performing, average performing, low performing) they oversee. Principals from three high-performing schools, seven average-performing schools, and two low-performing schools were interviewed. Principals from high-performing schools felt they had more autonomy than those in lower-performing schools in the areas of assigning teachers, transferring teachers and staff (though it was slight), discharging teachers and staff (also a slight difference), curriculum pacing and sequencing, and determining methods and materials. Both high- and average-performing school principals felt they had more autonomy in the areas of determining the number and type of faculty and staff, hiring teachers and staff, and allocating time for instruction. Interestingly, though the sample size is small, the low-performing schools felt they had

more autonomy in the areas of allocating resources and setting parental involvement requirements. Based on information gathered during the interviews, principals in higher-performing schools felt they more autonomy to lead their schools and less interference from the district than the principals in lower-performing schools. Principals of average-performing schools were more mixed in their responses and, as expected, principals in low-performing schools had the least autonomy over these functional areas.

Figure 3 Perceived Autonomy of Principals, by School Status

Functional Areas in which the Western State Principals Actually Have a "GREAT DEAL OF" or "SOME" AUTONOMY", by School Status



Overall, principal autonomy over staffing and determining curriculum, methods, and materials proved to be the biggest challenges to effective school leadership for the principals. A principal's number of years of experience in the district contributed to an informal sense of autonomy in some areas. Veteran principals were more familiar with the district and the people working within the district, and they were able to use this knowledge to advocate for the things their schools needed. Veteran principals also felt they had more control over managing teachers and staff within their schools. Also, the perceived degree of autonomy principals had over key functions that contribute to

effective school leadership differed among principals from high-, average-, and low-performing schools. Though it is not conclusive, it is logical that principals from higher-performing schools had greater freedom to make decisions than principals from lower-performing schools, which were more closely monitored by the district and/or state due to their lower performance status.

VIII. Barriers to Effective School Leadership

Principals were asked: (a) about their role in a number of different functional areas ranging from staffing, to operations, to instructional leadership; (b) whether their role was limited; and (c) if they perceived this limitation as a serious barrier to effective school leadership.

Table 11 lists the functional areas in which principals indicated they had a limited role.

The top 10 functional areas include:

1. Determining teacher pay or bonuses (100.0%)
2. Allocating time for instruction (91.7%)
3. Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum (91.7%)
4. Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget (83.3%)
5. Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff (83.3%)
6. Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff (83.3%)
7. Making program adoption decisions (83.3%)
8. Setting parental involvement requirements (83.3%)
9. Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth (66.7%)
10. Hiring teachers and support staff (66.7%)

Many of the areas in which the western state's principals played a limited role were centered on staffing issues and curriculum/methods issues. Transferring and discharging staff were identified as the most serious barriers that principals faced and principals attributed these barriers to the combined effect of district policies and union contracts.

Again, there are differences among the two districts that can be attributed to the different theories of action that are the basis for district management. In W-District 1, principals had a limited role in all areas involving instructional issues, which is not surprising in a managed-instruction district. In fact, all the principals (100%) who participated from W-District 1 felt they had a limited role in hiring, determining pay and bonuses, transferring and discharging staff, allocating time for instruction, making decisions about program adoption and curriculum pacing and sequencing, and setting parental involvement requirements. In W-District 2, a portfolio managed district, the only areas in which all the principals identified having a limited role were hiring teachers and support staff and determining teacher pay and bonuses. Other areas in which a majority of the principals felt they had a limited role include controlling key features of the school calendar (83.3%), allocating time for instruction (83.3%), and making decisions about curriculum pacing and sequencing (83.3%).

Of all of the areas in which the western state's principals identified having a limited role, only transferring (58.3%) and discharging (66.7%) unsuitable teachers and staff and setting parental involvement requirements (50.0%) were identified by half or more of the principals as a serious barrier to effective school leadership (Table 11).

Table 11 Principals' Responses to Their Role in Functional Areas and Whether These Areas Were a Serious Barrier to Effective School Leadership

Function	% of Principals Who Identified a Limited Role	% Who Have a Limited Role, and Who Believe it is a Serious Barrier	% of ALL Principals Who Identified Area as a Serious Barrier
Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget	83.3%	20.0%	16.7%
Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Hiring teachers and support staff	66.7%	62.5%	41.7%
Determining teacher pay or bonuses	100.0%	16.7%	16.7%
Assigning teachers and support staff	33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff*	83.3%	70.0%	58.3%
Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff*	83.3%	80.0%	66.7%
Assigning noninstructional duties to teachers and support staff	50.0%	16.7%	8.3%
Determining teacher and student schedules	41.7%	20.0%	8.3%
Controlling key features of the school calendar	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Allocating time for instruction	91.7%	36.4%	33.3%
Determining extracurricular activities	41.7%	20.0%	8.3%
Making program adoption decisions	83.3%	40.0%	33.3%
Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum	91.7%	18.2%	16.7%
Determining methods and materials	58.3%	28.6%	16.7%
Determining student discipline policies/procedures	41.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling student dress	41.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Setting parental involvement requirements	83.3%	60.0%	50.0%
Determining how much time you spend on instructional versus operational issues	50.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Controlling the school facility	25.0%	66.7%	16.7%
Engaging in private fundraising	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%

* Identified as the "most serious" barrier by the principals who were interviewed.

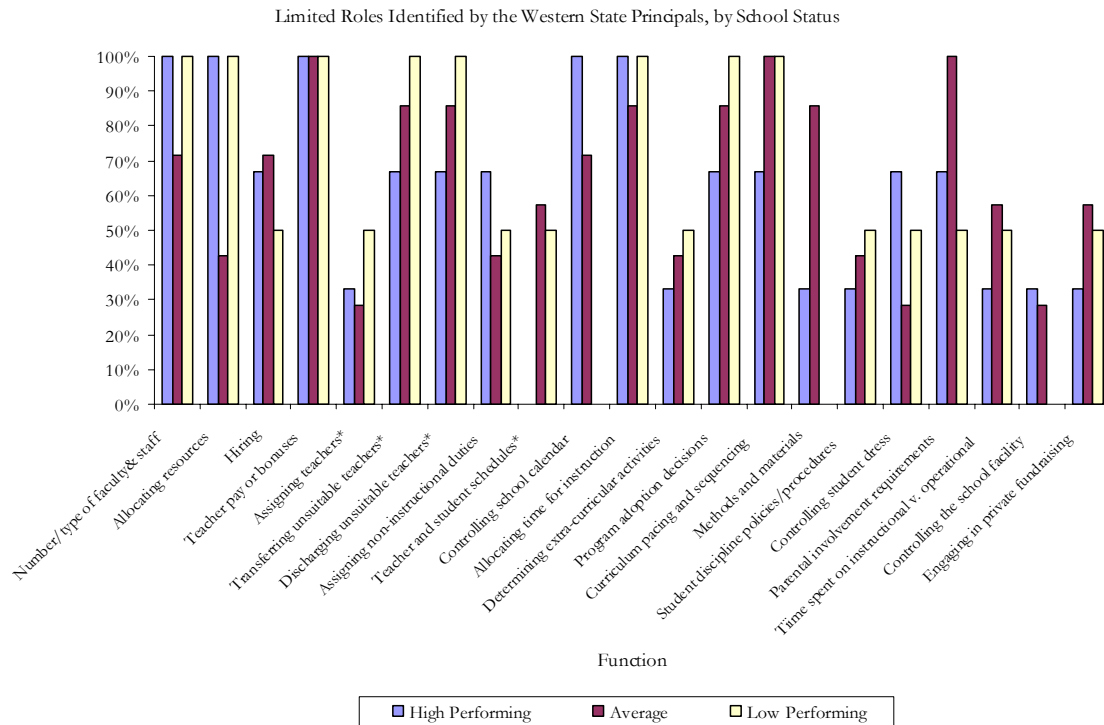
Table 12 Principals Response to Areas That They Have a LIMITED ROLE in and Those That They Identify as Being a SERIOUS BARRIER to Effective School Leadership, by School Status

FUNCTION	LIMITED ROLE			SERIOUS BARRIER		
	High (n=3)	Average (n=7)	Low (n=2)	High (n=3)	Average (n=7)	Low (n=2)
Number/type of faculty and staff	100.0%	71.4%	100.0%	33.3%	14.3%	0.0%
Allocating resources	100.0%	42.9%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Hiring	66.7%	71.4%	50.0%	33.3%	42.9%	50.0%
Teacher pay or bonuses	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	14.3%	50.0%
Assigning teachers	33.3%	28.6%	50.0%	33.3%	0.0%	50.0%
Transferring unsuitable teachers	66.7%	85.7%	100.0%	33.3%	71.4%	50.0%
Discharging unsuitable teachers	66.7%	85.7%	100.0%	33.3%	71.4%	100.0%
Assigning noninstructional duties	66.7%	42.9%	50.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Teacher and student schedules	0.0%	57.1%	50.0%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%
Controlling school calendar	100.0%	71.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Allocating time for instruction	100.0%	85.7%	100.0%	33.3%	28.6%	50.0%
Determining extracurricular activities	33.3%	42.9%	50.0%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%
Program adoption decisions	66.7%	85.7%	100.0%	0.0%	42.9%	50.0%
Curriculum pacing and sequencing	66.7%	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%
Methods and materials	33.3%	85.7%	0.0%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%
Student discipline policies/procedures	33.3%	42.9%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling student dress	66.7%	28.6%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Parental involvement requirements	66.7%	100.0%	50.0%	33.3%	71.4%	0.0%
Time spent on instructional versus operational issues	33.3%	57.1%	50.0%	0.0%	42.9%	50.0%
Controlling the school facility	33.3%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%
Engaging in private fundraising	33.3%	57.1%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

When the same data were examined based on the response of principals from three categories of school status (high performing, average performing, or low performing), there were some differences among the school principals' responses, though the sample size is too small to make any conclusions (Table 12, Figure 4, Figure 5). Principals from high-performing schools identified a few key areas where they had a limited role; however, none were seen as serious barriers to effective school leadership. More than 70% of the principals from average-performing schools identified 10 areas where they had a limited role, and only 3 of those areas (transferring and discharging unsuitable teachers and staff and setting parental involvement requirements) were identified as serious barriers. Both principals of low-performing schools identified eight areas where

they played a limited role, but only one (discharging unsuitable teachers and staff) was identified as being a serious barrier.²

Figure 4 Areas of Limited Role for Principals

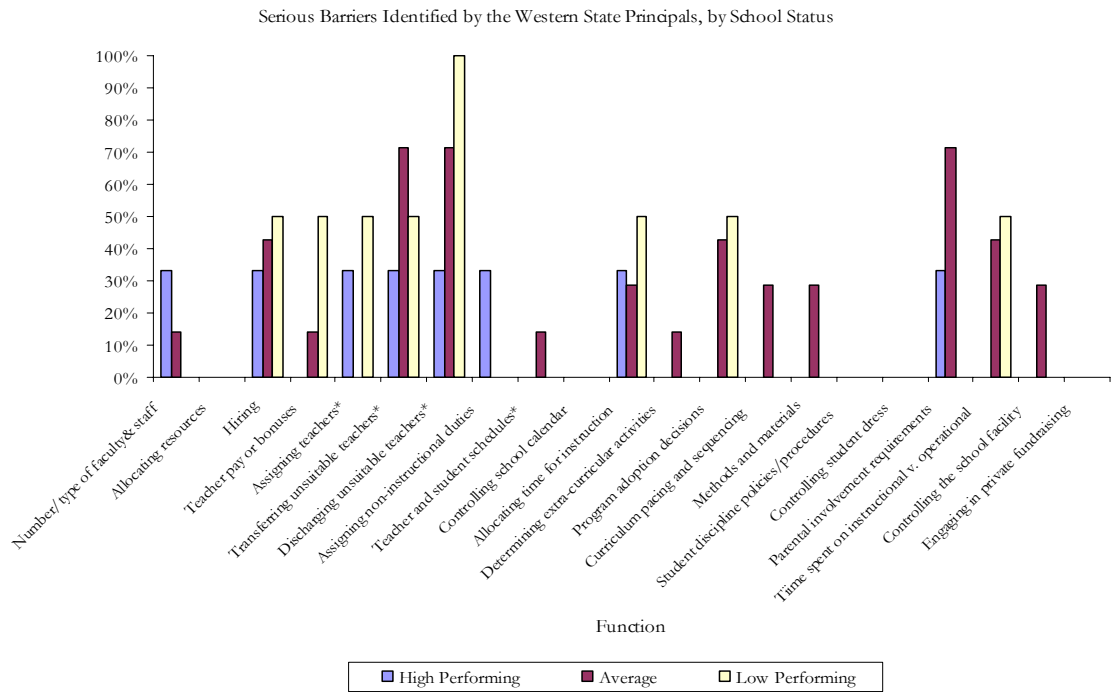


To overcome the barriers they face, principals employed a variety of strategies. Many mentioned adhering to and accepting district policies and working to match them to the needs of their schools as being essential to overcoming barriers. Communication within the school and district was another critical component to effective school leadership. Other principals alluded to not attempting to overcome any particular barrier all at once, but rather working incrementally on a day-to-day basis to change the way things were done. For all the western state’s principals, a very important strategy to overcoming barriers was supporting teachers and staff in understanding the external (district) demands upon the school and sharing leadership of the school by empowering teachers and staff to work with the principal toward meeting external goals and demands. Last,

² Because there are only two principals from low-performing schools, it is difficult to come to any conclusions about principals from low-performing schools in the western state visited.

creatively working within the school, district, and surrounding community to meet the needs of the students within the schools is an approach that many of the veteran principals used.

Figure 5 Areas That Principals Identified as a Serious Barrier to Effective School Leadership, by School Status



IX. Skills for Effective Leadership

All the western state’s principals identified the skills of *making decisions, persevering in challenging situations, managing teachers and staff, promoting collegiality through collaboration, communicating, resolving conflict, and building a community of support* as very important to effective school leadership (Table 13). Most of the skills listed were identified as very important with the exception of those that focused on curriculum. Contrary to the current day emphasis on the principal as instructional leader, principals seemed to feel these decisions were either left to the district or the teachers in the classroom, and the principals’ job was to interpret between the two.

For each skill the principals identified as very important to effective school leadership, they were asked a subsequent question about whether they felt they could use more

training in that particular area. In the areas for which more than 75% of the principals identified a skill as “very important,” more than half of the principals who had identified the skill as “very important” also indicated they needed more training in that particular area (Table 13). These areas include: *developing and communicating a vision* (54.5%), *developing a teacher/staff performance accountability system* (66.7%), *communicating effectively (externally)* (54.5%), *managing and analyzing data* (70.0%), and *making data-driven decisions* (60.0%). The responses in W-District 1 were mixed over the skill areas; however, in W-District 2, the majority of principals identified *developing and communicating a vision* as a key development need.

When the western state’s principals were asked what skills they valued in other principals, they identified communication and high expectations of students as essential skills. Additionally, good interpersonal skills and a genuine willingness to listen and support teachers, students, and staff were valued. The most frequent response focused on the “political dynamic” necessary to be a successful principal. The principals admired those who were able to creatively play within the boundaries of what is allowable by the district and other existing constraints in order to accomplish what needs to be done.

Table 13 Public School Principals’ Identified Effective School Leadership Skills and Areas for Additional Training

Western State	Public Schools	
SKILLS	% of Principals Who Indicated This Skill was VERY IMPORTANT to Effective School Leadership	Of Those Principals That Identified the Skill as Very Important, the % of Principals Indicating They Could Use MORE TRAINING in This Area
Manage business and financial administration	75.0%	44.4%
Take risks	75.0%	22.2%
Make decisions	100.0%	25.0%
Persevere in challenging situations	100.0%	16.7%
Develop and communicate a vision	91.7%	54.5%
Experimentation	33.3%	0.0%
Function in an environment of cultural differences	83.3%	40.0%
Manage teachers and staff	100.0%	33.3%
Develop a teacher/staff performance accountability system	75.0%	66.7%
Communicate effectively (internally)	100.0%	33.3%
Promote collegiality through collaboration	100.0%	41.7%
Resolve conflicts	100.0%	33.3%
Design curriculum	8.3%	100.0%
Evaluate curriculum	33.3%	75.0%
Evaluate classroom teachers	91.7%	45.5%
Build a community of learners	91.7%	36.4%
Communicate effectively (externally)	91.7%	54.5%
Build a community of support	100.0%	41.7%
Manage and analyze data	83.3%	70.0%
Make data-driven decisions	83.3%	60.0%

X. Conclusion

The western state’s principals believed that the ability to listen, communicate, and work within the confines of the existing system were essential to being effective school leaders. They described their jobs as challenging and rewarding in a dynamic context. For them, it is an effective leader’s responsibility to filter external and internal information and shelter

the teachers and staff from the ever-changing environment that surrounds their schools in order to permit teachers to go about the business of teaching students. This makes any effective school leader a pivotal player in interpreting district, state, and federal policy and discerning what and how these policies and players should impact their schools. In a sense for them, one of the most important roles of an effective school leader is being the gatekeeper for who and what are able to impact their schools..

Effective School Leadership and Principals' Ability to Exercise School Leadership

The principals interviewed described many common challenges to exercising effective school leadership, though nearly all principals felt they had the ability to exercise effective school leadership. This may have more to do with their personal understanding of their own capabilities, without taking into consideration the barriers imposed upon them, or it may reflect a norm of acceptance of the limitations to being a principal. The principals who participated in these interviews had clearly accepted the school and district culture in which they had to function. Therefore, they accepted the challenges that came with the position of principal as part of the job and did not (in most cases) feel it was within the domain of responsibility or power to change the system.

Barriers

The primary issues that the western state's principals faced were staffing issues (transferring and discharging unsuitable teachers and staff), allocating time for instruction, and balancing the demands upon time and learning. According to the principals, the source of these limitations were union contracts, state policy on instructional minutes, district policy on curriculum and pacing, and the regimented requirements of the federal Reading First grant funds (in cases when the school has the grant).

Along with the common challenges these principals faced, there were some differences based on the local context, the number of years of experiences as a school principal, and a school's status (high performing, average performing, or low performing). The differences in local context included differences in the theories of actions within the two

districts and differences in local circumstances (enrollment, budgets). The two districts were managed using different theories of action. W-District 1 used a managed-instruction approach, which entailed centralized services from the districts with the expectation that the principals ensured fidelity of implementation to the program, curriculum, and pacing.

Principals in W-District 1 had a unanimous response to questions about curriculum pacing and sequencing. Though there was some indication that principals would like to have more say as to what programs were adopted, these principals clearly and consistently articulated the goals to be accomplished and the overall district's (and consequently the school's) vision. Their issues with staff centered on attempting to persuade veteran teachers to work within the district-mandated curriculum, sequencing, and pacing. In cases when principals were unable to gain the cooperation of the veteran teachers, transferring and discharging them proved difficult because of the union contract and district policies.

In W-District 2, the district used a portfolio theory of action. This type of management allowed principals more autonomy to make decisions that met the specific needs of students. Therefore, these principals' responsibilities were not as consistent as those in W-District 1 because W-District 2 principal had more control over their day-to-day operations. Still, W-District 2 principals faced barriers, the most influential of which was staffing issues. Staffing issues were particularly salient because of the decreased enrollments and school consolidations, which flooded the system with veteran teachers.

In both districts, principals from the higher-performing schools felt they had more autonomy than those in the lower-performing schools (in general), although principals from higher-performing schools in W-District 2 had more flexibility than their counterparts in W-District 1 because of the different district management styles. In both districts, principals from lower-performing schools discussed higher levels of district involvement in their schools that included an increase in paperwork that proved to be overwhelming to many of these principals. Indeed, increased involvement of the district within the school is attributed to more demands upon the principal for reports and

updates, and the principals felt this took away from their ability to provide instructional leadership and focus on improving student achievement. This was a common point of frustration among these principals.

Among the principals, very few (n=2) began as teachers from the district in which they were currently working. Therefore, there are not many district veterans (principals who have been in the district for 20 or more years). The veteran principals felt a “de facto sense of autonomy” because they understood the district and community and had formed the right relationships to accomplish their goals. Those who were newer to the district were much more beholden to district policy, though there is some variation among these principals.

The number of years of experience principals possessed had some bearing on how much autonomy they felt in particular functional areas. Staffing issues, though still a challenge, were more manageable for principals who had more experience. In the interviews, they explained that they understood how to “game” the system toward getting what they want. Principals who decided to pursue and discharge or transfer felt they had to sacrifice time that would be better spent on raising student achievement or other priorities. The time and attention that is required for the formal processes were not worth it, and the more experienced principals had developed informal strategies to manage their staffing issues.

Despite functioning under different theories of action, the two districts struggled with similar issues though the reasons principals identified for these issues were different. In W-District 1, principals spoke less of the state mandate on instructional minutes, which was more than likely because the district had such a strong influence over curriculum sequencing and pacing and program adoption that school principals did not have to think about this demand. The district had already managed the issue and incorporated it into the centralized curriculum and instruction. In W-District 2, principals were told about the state requirements and then given the “flexibility” to accommodate them so that they met the needs of students within their schools. Unfortunately, this flexibility was a falsehood because principals were faced with union contract limits on teacher time and sometimes

federal Reading First grants, which really gave them no option for flexibility. In fact, attempting to balance all of these demands proved to be its own stress.

Likewise, staffing was an issue in both districts, but the reasons were different.

W-District 1 principals needed to convert veteran teachers and were frustrated and wanted to make changes when they were unable to do so. W-District 2 principals felt that some of their teachers were not a good fit, but had to bring on these teachers because of their seniority. In the end, these principals had many of the same challenges, but the different theories of action under which the districts operated contributed to the varying sources of these challenges. The managed-instruction district (W-District 1) tended to identify issues at the district level and the district's negotiations with the union, while the portfolio district (W-District 2) tended to identify multiple sources such as the district, state, and union contract.

Skills for Effective School Leaders

Principals had a consensus on the types of skills that today's principals needed to be effective leaders. More than 90% of principals identified communication, a sense of community, and perseverance as overarching qualities that any principal needs. Communications and community were largely focused on the staff and school community (parents, local community members). Principals identified *resolving conflicts*, *promoting collaboration*, and *building a community of support* as essential ingredients for effective school leadership. In particular, developing and communicating a vision was identified as a way to thread all of these essential elements together into a coherent organization. Contextual coherence among the multiple constituencies that principals served was one of the most challenging issues they faced and makes *persevering in challenging situations* yet another essential skill for today's school leader. Because there are so many moving parts to leading a school with the changing factors of district, state, and federal policy, it was difficult for principals to find balance between satisfying external requirements and maintaining internal stability.

In conclusion, the principals interviewed believed they were capable of being effective school leaders despite identifying many barriers. The sources of their barriers were found at the district, state, and (sometimes) federal level, though because the state or district is often the stand-in for federal requirements, the principals identified the state or district as the key source of some barriers. In W-District 1 and W-District 2, staffing was a major issue; however, the local contextual factors and the different district management styles led to different interpretations of why these existed and how they could be remedied. Interestingly, these principals felt they were, for the most part, able to function within their environments and relied on different skills depending on their level of experience and/or personal background. Overall, these principals have a clear, if not definitive, sense of what it takes to be an effective school leader, and much of this is focused on communication, building a community, and ultimately functioning within and accepting their existing environment despite the challenges and barriers they face.