

Appendix C. Southeastern State Report

Can School Leaders Lead?

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

I. Introduction

In the southeastern state, six public school principals 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 need to be effective leaders. All principals were from elementary schools within a single urban district.

Background

The southeastern state is a “right to work” state—for public schools in the state, teachers and school staff are not legally allowed to collectively bargain for salaries, benefits, and so forth. Salaries and rules of employment for public school employees are first set at the state level. The salary changes set by the state legislature generally reflect increases in the cost of living. School districts are then able to supplement the salary levels and/or rules of employment as they deem necessary. Rules of employment, including the number of hours in the work week and regulations regarding discharge of unsuitable staff are also set by the state legislature. Some subtle differences and surprising similarities exist between the non-union (western and mid-western states) or right-to-work state (the southeastern state) interviewed and states that allow unions. These comparisons can be illustrated in the barriers and issues principals face as school leaders. The major themes that emerged from the noncharter public school principal interviews are in the areas of district organization, staffing, and budget.

Challenges emerge from the district's theory of action. The district identified in this report is organized around a “managed instruction” theory of action, meaning the district is committed to a centrally determined instructional model and instructional and staffing

approaches that are applied to all schools. The district controls and supports staffing, curriculum, and organization at the school level. 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 levels of resources and supervision to achieve fidelity to the model. The district’s theory of action limited principals’ ability to make scoping and sequencing decisions, select texts and materials, and make program adoption decisions. Principals had some flexibility, however, as many noted that if they had the appropriate data to support an alternate decision in any of these areas, the superintendent was willing to accommodate deviance from the district’s instructional model.

Another challenge identified by most principals was the organization of the district into several regions with “constituent superintendents” and then having one county superintendent for the whole district. Principals felt the added layer of bureaucracy sometimes slowed processes down, and the strength of the constituent superintendents to whom they reported impacted their ability to make appropriate changes and decisions within their schools.

Also, the superintendent recently centralized operations by taking authority over noninstructional activities away from the school principals. The custodians and lunch staff in each school reported to a central manager, rather than to the principals. Therefore, if a principal needed something done in the school building that required the services of the centralized staff, he or she would have to contact the central manager who would then notify the appropriate person in the school building. The intent of this policy was to allow principals to increase the time they spent on instructional leadership within their schools. Principals’ responses varied. Some found it was a hindrance—because ultimately they are responsible for all of the school and no longer have the power to directly oversee parts of the school—while most saw it as an opportunity to allow them to focus on instructional issues.

Principals mentioned a few staffing issues. In most cases the principals felt they had an appropriate level of control and influence over factors such as assigning noninstructional

duties to staff, determining staff assignments, and setting the school calendar. Areas that challenged principals included the mandated teacher-to-student ratio, which required them to place a certain number of classroom teachers at each grade level. This mandate made it difficult to concentrate teachers in the areas of greatest need within the school. Principals unanimously felt they had control over who they hired in their schools; however, discharging staff is a long and arduous process as it was dictated by state law and can take a principal from 1.5 to 2 years to remove an employee. Principals reported that if they followed the district process which required them to back-up decisions with data, then the superintendent was likely to support their staffing decisions (discharging staff). Superintendent support of the principals lessened the feeling that discharging staff was a barrier to school leadership among southeastern state principals.

By far the biggest challenges principals faced were budgetary in nature. According to principals, the state's system of funding the schools using a standard per-pupil allotment did not address the unique local needs of the students within each school. Additionally, the teacher-to-student ratio requirements gave principals little flexibility regarding the use of funds because the bulk of funds were spent on teachers (and perhaps teachers who could be better used in other parts of the school). Influence over the amount of funds and the degree of flexibility principals over use was a serious constraint. Additionally, the state-mandated salary requirements for teachers proved to be a challenge because other nearby districts were able to supplement these salary levels with local funds. The competition for qualified teachers with surrounding districts that could pay teachers more made it difficult for principals to hire and retain teachers who are asked to do more in their more challenging district for less money than neighboring districts.

II. Characteristics of Principals Interviewed

Six principals from district-operated public schools in one urban district were interviewed. All of the principals were leaders of elementary schools. Among the schools, one covered grades K–3, four covered grades K–5 and one covered grades K–6. All of the principals were female. Approximately 66% were White/Caucasian and 33% were African American. Sixty-six percent of the principals were aged 45 years or older

and the remaining were under 45 years of age (Table 1). On average, the principals had 9.5 years of experience and the majority (8.8 years) of that experience came from within the district (Table 2). Their years of experience as principals ranged from 3 to 19 years. Four of the principals had gained all of their experience in the district and all six had taught in the district for some time, an average of 8.5 years. Based on information from these principals, it appears the district has developed a career ladder for teachers in the district to move into the principal position. Sixty-six percent of the principals held master’s degrees and 33% held specialist degrees (Table 3).

Table 1 Average Age of Principals Interviewed

Age Range	% of Principals
65–74	0.00%
55–64	33.33%
45–54	33.33%
35–44	16.67%
25–34	16.67%

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

Years of Experience	As Principal	As Administrator (not Principal)	As Teacher
Total	9.5	4.8	8.8
District	8.8	4.3	8.5
School	4.3	0.2	0.8

Table 3 Educational Attainment of Principals Interviewed

Educational Attainment	% of Principals
Master’s Degree	66.6%
Specialist Certification	33.3%
Doctorate (PhD/EdD)	0.0%

Principals described their role as the leader of a school as both overwhelming and fulfilling. Many felt that, within this spectrum, the skills of being a “master of all trades” or a “multi-tasker” were essential to being successful. They each discussed centering their efforts on students and supporting student achievement; however, their jobs often required them to focus on areas that were not necessarily focused on instructional leadership, such as budgetary and personnel issues. Additionally, principals felt that they

were required to be many things to the many different constituencies they served (e.g., students, teachers, parents, district staff, state staff, community members). All of the principals interviewed believed that their leadership style entailed shared decision making, which really helped them to gain buy-in of the faculty and to support the demands of leading the school.

For the southeastern state’s principals, external expectations for students within the schools were articulated in terms of student achievement as well as school climate issues. Most of the principals described the state and federal requirements for student achievement as aligned with the district goals and all had incorporated these student achievement goals into their own visions for the school. Although raising student achievement was of the utmost importance to all of the principals, one principal summed up the perspective expressed by all principals, stating, “The district sees the numbers, we see the kids.”

III. School Characteristics

The southeastern state’s principals of the six district-operated public schools served 2,691 students in grades K–6. One school served students in grades K–3, four served students in grades K–5, and one served students in grades K–6.

School Demographics

On average, the schools serve 77 students per grade, and approximately 60% of these students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Table 4). Four of the schools had student bodies in which 88% to 100% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, while two of the schools reported fewer than 45% of their students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Nine percent of the students were limited English proficient.

Table 4 Urban Public (Non-Charter) Schools Demographics

Enrollment	# of Students per Grade	% Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	% Special Education	% Limited English Proficient	Per-Pupil Expenditure
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Average	449	77	60%	21%	9%	\$6,789
Total	2691					

The student-to-teacher ratio was approximately 13.1 students per teacher. Teachers possessed an average of 12 years of experience at the schools. An average of 6.2 novice teachers worked at each school. The majority of the novice teachers were concentrated in low-performing schools. The average percentage of teacher turnover within the schools was 16.5%, with the majority of the teacher turnover found in the two low-performing schools (40% and 22%) and one of the average-performing schools (28%).

Table 5 Urban Public (Non-Charter) Schools 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	13.1	5.9	11.7	6.2	0.0	16.5%

School Status

For the purposes of this report, schools were categorized into one of three categories: high performing, average performing, and low performing. State school rating systems were arranged into these three categories so that comparisons across states based on school status can be made. The southeastern state’s specific designations have been withheld to maintain the state’s anonymity.

Of the six principals interviewed of district-operated public schools, two were leaders of schools that were high performing, two were principals of schools designated as average performing, and two served schools designated as low performing (Table 6).

Table 6 School Designations

School Status Category	Report Designation
High Performing	2
Average Performing	2
Low Performing	2

IV. Constraints on Leadership

The general sense among the principals was that they had an appropriate level of autonomy. The constraints to their leadership they identified were in the following areas:

(a) what counts and does not count for determining student achievement; (b) a lack of input into the older school funding formula; and (c) an inability to make their own decisions within the school on the best ways to accomplish district and state goals. Constraints were more intense for those principals from schools that were low performing. Interestingly, principals of the high-performing schools felt a level of constraint because they were treated the same as principals from low- and average-performing schools, although they felt their needs and concerns were much different. The average-performing school principals seemed to feel the least level of constraint.

When asked to what degree their actions to raise student achievement were constrained by outside forces, 33% of principals interviewed indicated that their actions were “not very constrained,” and 50% indicated their actions were “somewhat constrained” (Table 7). Reflecting this same feeling, 33% of principals felt they had a “strong ability” to exercise effective school leadership, and 50% felt they had “somewhat of an ability” to exercise effective school leadership (Table 8). The interviews revealed a degree of satisfaction or resignation to current circumstances and environments. Although in discussions principals could each name areas in which they would have like to have more influence, they each felt they could function in the current climate, and that no challenge truly stopped them from being effective leaders.

Years of experience seemed to account for the differences among the principals. Principals who had been in the district for less than 20 years felt less constrained than those principals who had been in the district for 20 or more years.

Table 7 How Much Principals Feel Their Actions to Raise Student Achievement Are Constrained by Outside Forces

SOUTHEASTERN STATE (n=6)		Not at All Constrained	Not Very Constrained	Somewhat Constrained	Very Constrained
		0%	33.33%	50.0%	0.0%
All public school principals interviewed (n = 6)*		0%	33.33%	50.0%	0.0%
YEARS IN DISTRICT					
Principals who have been in the district for less than 20 years (n = 2)		0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Principals who have been in the district for 20 or more years (n = 4)**		0.0%	0.0%	75.0%	0.0%
SCHOOL STATUS					
Principals of schools that are high performing (n = 2)		0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
Principals of schools that are average performing (n = 2)		50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%
Principals of schools that are low performing (n = 2)*		0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%

* One principal did not answer this question

** Not all principals responded.

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

SOUTHEASTERN STATE (n = 6)	Strong Ability	Somewhat of an Ability	Somewhat Unable	Strongly Unable
	All Public School Principals Interviewed (n = 6)*	50.0%	33.3%	0.0%
YEARS IN DISTRICT				
Principals who have been in the district for less than 20 years (n = 2)	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Principals who have been in the district for 20 or more years (n = 4)*	50.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
SCHOOL STATUS				
Principals of schools that are high performing (n = 2)	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Principals of schools that are average performing (n = 2)	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Principals of schools that are low performing (n = 2)*	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%

* One principal did not respond.

Staffing issues were very important to all principals. In particular, principals identified determining the number and type of faculty and staff in their buildings (100.0%), hiring staff (100.0%), assigning teachers (100.0%), transferring unsuitable teachers (83.3%), assigning noninstructional duties to staff (83.3%), and discharging unsuitable teachers (100.0%) as very important to their effectiveness as leaders. Still, the southeastern state's principals believed they had varying levels of influence over these functions, and most believed they had some autonomy over them. Principals felt they had influence over hiring (100.0%), assigning teachers (83.3%), assigning noninstructional duties (83.3%), and discharging unsuitable staff (66.7%). The areas where they felt they had the least amount of influence were determining the number and type of staff within their budgets (83.3%) and transferring staff (83.3%). Repeatedly, the ability of principals to determine

the number and type of staff within their schools proved to be challenging. Principals attributed this challenge to an antiquated funding system and the limitations of the state and district to fund public schools. Transferring staff either into or out of the school was not a process the principals were familiar with because the southeastern state is a right-to-work state. So, while their influence was limited in this area, it is more of an indication that, rather than transfer unsuitable staff, principals would more likely follow the procedures to discharge a staff member

Other areas that principals identified as being very important to effective school leadership included determining teacher and student schedules (100.0%), allocating time for instruction (100.0%), determining methods and materials (100.0%), and determining the time they spent on instructional versus operational functions (100.0%). All of the principals felt they currently had an adequate level of autonomy over each of these areas.

Table 9 Perceived Need for Versus Actual Autonomy of Principals Interviewed

Function	Perceived Importance to Effectiveness as a School Leader				How Much Autonomy the 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	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	50.00%	33.33%
2 Allocating resources	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	50.00%	0.00%	16.67%
3 Hiring	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
4 Teacher pay or bonuses*	33.33%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
5 Assigning teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	33.33%	16.67%	0.00%
6 Transferring unsuitable teachers*	83.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	66.67%	16.67%
7 Discharging unsuitable teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%
8 Assigning noninstructional duties	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
9 Teacher and student schedules	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
10 Controlling school calendar	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%
11 Allocating time for instruction	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	16.67%	16.67%
12 Determining extracurricular activities	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%
13 Program adoption decisions	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%
14 Curriculum pacing and sequencing	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	66.67%	0.00%	16.67%
15 Methods and materials	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	66.67%	16.67%	0.00%
16 Student discipline policies/procedures	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%
17 Controlling student dress	33.33%	50.00%	16.67%	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
18 Parental involvement requirements	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	33.33%	16.67%	33.33%
19 Time spent on instructional versus operational issues	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	16.67%	33.33%	0.00%
20 Controlling the school facility	50.00%	33.33%	16.67%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
21 Engaging in private fundraising	16.67%	16.67%	50.00%	16.67%	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%

* Not all principals responded to this question.

V. Principals' Influence Over School Functions

Table 10 takes another look at this data. By comparing the percentage of principals who identified a function as being very or somewhat important to effective school leadership with the percentage of principals who currently have a great deal or some influence over this same functional area, one is able to see some areas of discrepancy between the two groups, as well as areas where the current level of influence is at or close to where the principals believe it should be.

Again, determining the number and type of staff within their budgets and transferring of staff are the areas with the most discrepancy between the ideal and their actual amount of influence. Determining the number and type of staff is a serious challenge for these principals, while transferring of staff is less of an issue because it is not a strategy that is frequently implemented within the district.

This analysis also identified that determining teacher pay and bonuses and setting parental involvement requirements were barriers. Principals felt they had little influence in determining teacher pay because salaries were set by the state legislature. Districts within the state do have the option to supplement the state set minimum salaries, but according to principals, the district under study did not have the resources to supplement salaries. Discussions with principals indicated that this is a challenge to leading their schools because other districts that are able to supplement the minimum salary threshold set by the state draw teachers away from their schools and are better able to attract new teacher candidates.

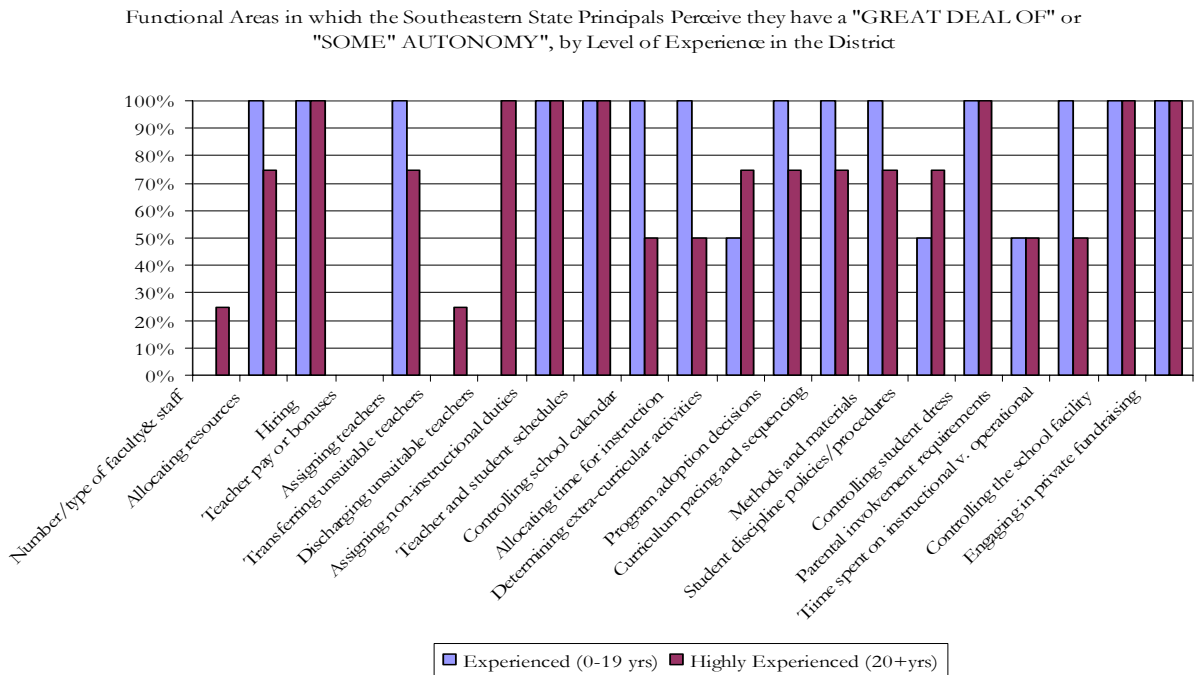
Table 10 Perceived Need for Effective School Versus Actual Influence of Principals Interviewed

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

The leadership context of each school is 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 experience and/or school status influenced principals' perceptions of ability to exert effective school leadership. Figures 1 and 2 categorize the principals' perceptions of influence over different functional areas 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" (1–19 years of experience

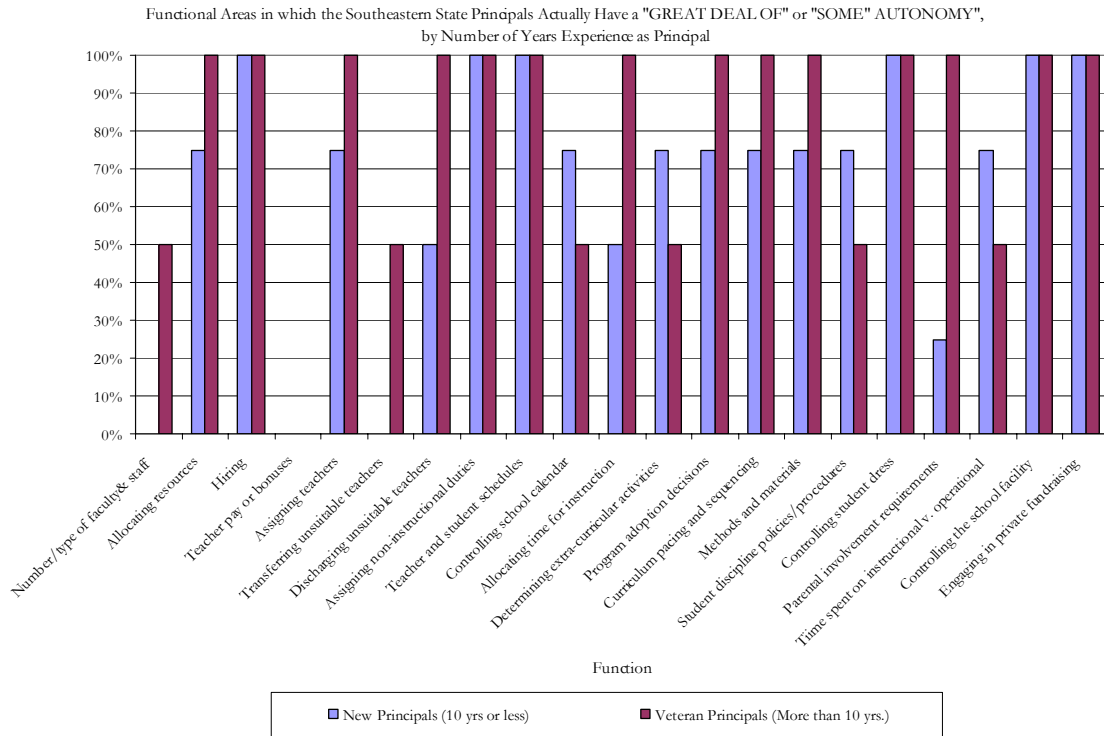
working in the district) or as “highly experienced educators” (20 or more years of experience working in the district). Second, principals were categorized into two categories based on the total number of years of experience they had as principals (Figure 2). The principals were sorted into “new principals” (10 years or less experience) and “veteran principals” (10 or more years of experience).

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



The principals who had spent 20 or more years in the district (highly experienced) felt they had more influence than their counterparts with less than 20 years of experience in the district (experienced) over controlling the school calendar, allocating time for instruction, and determining the time spent on instructional versus operational issues. Interviews did not reveal details as to why these differences might exist.

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



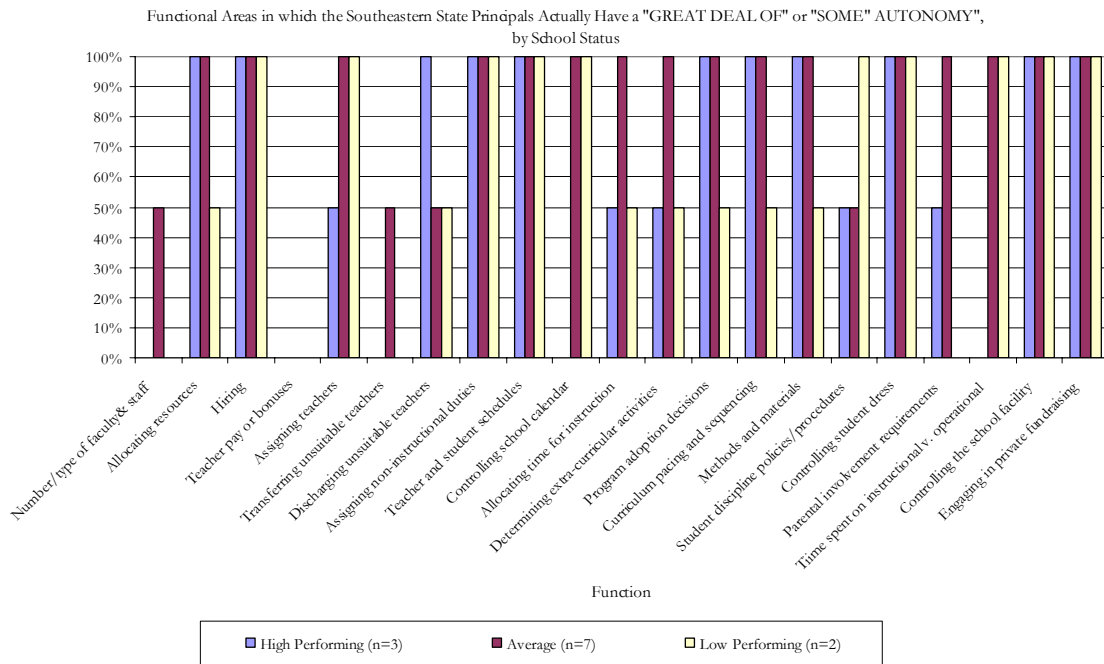
School principals had different responses regarding perceived levels of autonomy depending upon the number of years of experience they had as principals (Figure 2). Veteran principals felt they had more influence over determining the type and number of staff, allocating time for instruction, and setting parental involvement requirements. Because most of the principals spent a majority, if not all of their career as principals within the district, it is likely that the veteran principals felt they had more influence over determining the type and number of staff within their school buildings. This may be attributed to the relationships they have developed over their years in the district. Also, these principals have become familiar with how decisions are made within the district. Their less-experienced counterparts may be less adept in these areas simply because they have not spent as much time in the district. In most of the other areas, the newer and veteran principals felt they had relatively similar levels of influence.

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

In Figure 3, the principals' responses were divided into three categories based on the status of the schools they were leading. As mentioned previously, for the purposes of this report, schools were grouped into one of three performance categories based on the state

performance designation. The three categories are high, average, and low performing. Because there are only two schools from each of the categories, the information in Figure 3 does not reveal any significant differences among the principals based on their school's performance status.

Figure 3 Perceived Influence of Principals, by School Status



VII. Barriers to Effective School Leadership

Principals were asked: (a) about their roles in a number of different functional areas ranging from staffing, to operations, to instructional leadership; (b) whether their roles were 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 five functional areas include:

1. Determining teacher pay or bonuses (100.0%)
2. Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget (83.3%)
3. Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff (50.0%)

4. Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff (50.0%)
5. Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth (50.0%)

Many of the areas in which principals played a limited role are related to budget and staffing issues. These are not easily separated from one another because the bulk of the budgets are spent on staff. Therefore, any limits to the budget affect the principal's ability to hire staff and determine the positions necessary to meet their students' needs. Further limiting their ability, the principals were required to meet the state and district student-to-teacher ratios which sometimes forced principals to place teachers in less needy areas within the school. Making determinations about teacher pay or bonuses constrained principals in their ability to hire and retain teachers, who were able to find better salaries in neighboring districts due to differences in resources among the districts.

Principals' ability to allocate resources for materials, textbooks, and so forth was also limited by their budget allocations. Because the district was a managed instruction district, the books and materials needed are provided to the schools by the state and district at no cost. Any additional materials were purchased with what was left over in the school budget after meeting the staffing requirements. Principals reported that this approach left very little discretionary funding for them to make decisions about things their particular schools need. They reiterated that the way schools were funded did not account for the differences in circumstances and local context found among schools within the same district.

Table 11 Principals’ Responses to Their Roles in Functional Areas and Whether These Areas Are Seen as 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%	100.0%	83.3%
Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth	50.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Hiring teachers and support staff	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining teacher pay or bonuses	100.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Assigning teachers and support staff	16.7%	100.0%	16.7%
Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff	50.0%	100.0%	50.0%
Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff	50.0%	100.0%	50.0%
Assigning noninstructional duties to teachers and support staff	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining teacher and student schedules	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling key features of the school calendar	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Allocating time for instruction	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining extracurricular activities	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Making program adoption decisions	33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum	33.3%	100.0%	33.3%
Determining methods and materials	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining student discipline policies/procedures	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling student dress	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Setting parental involvement requirements	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining how much time you spend on instructional versus operational issues	33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
Controlling the school facility	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Engaging in private fundraising	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

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

When the same data are examined based on the school status (high, average, or low performing), differences among the school principals' responses were very limited. The sample size was too small to make any conclusions (Table 12, Figure 4, Figure 5) and the data did not reveal any major differences among the schools based on their performance status. However, discussions with the principals suggest that those in the low-performing schools were given more direction and supervision by the district. Interestingly, principals from the high-performing schools, although they had less district intervention, felt that the district tended to treat all of the school principals equally. Therefore, they were grouped together with the principals of the low-performing schools, who may need more direction and intervention from the district. In particular, this lack of differentiation between the high- and low-performing schools limited the principals in the high performing schools from making decisions that could benefit their school while meeting performance expectations because it did not fit into the mold the district had created for all of the schools to follow under its managed instruction theory of action.

Figure 4 Areas Identified by Principals in Which They Have a Limited Role, by School Status

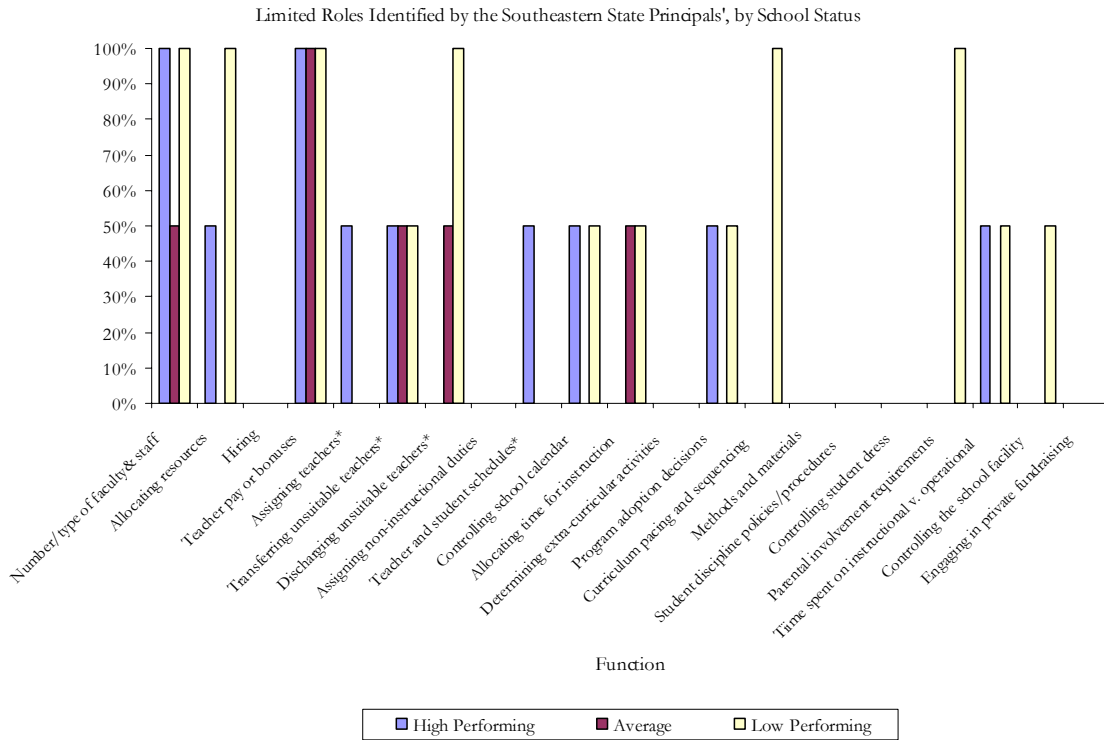
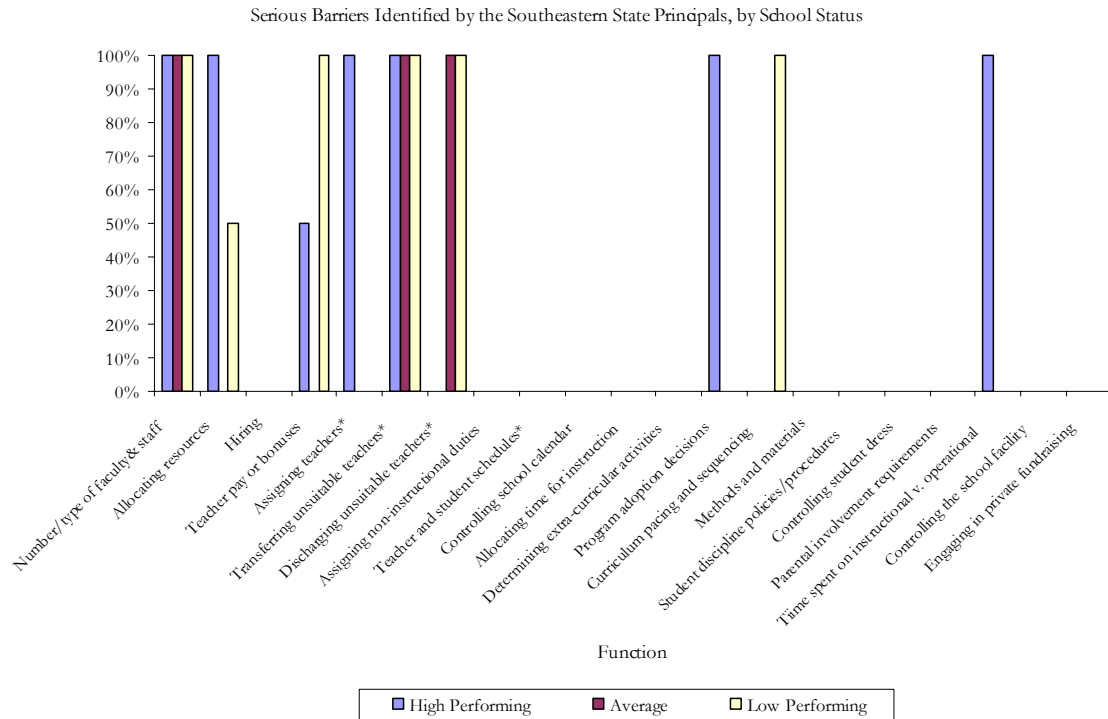


Figure 5 Areas Principals Identified as a Serious Barrier to Effective School Leadership, by School Status



The interviews revealed a few areas that were challenges for these principals. First, Federal Title I and Reading First grant fund requirements were cited as a challenge in the schools that were receiving the bulk of these funds. Although the federal requirements for spending Title I allocations have become more flexible, a few principals indicated that the state's additional requirements for spending this money made it challenging to allocate funds where they were most needed. The schools receiving the Reading First grant funds explained that the district developed its own model with instructional minute requirements, which was acceptable, but the additional state accountability measures placed upon the implementation of this model made local context adjustments extremely difficult. One of the two principals whose schools received these funds referred to this as the biggest barrier she faces as a school leader.

The second area the principals discussed as a barrier to leadership was the organization of the district. The district was set up so that each school principal reports to a constituent superintendent who in turn reports to the district superintendent. This added layer of bureaucracy sometimes slowed down decisions. Also, the strength of a principal's constituent superintendent to advocate on behalf of the school had an impact on that principal's ability to make changes to the district mandates that might better fit the school. During the interviews, principals carefully implied that the quality of the working relationship between the principal and the constituent superintendent also impacted the influence of the principal.

VIII. Skills for Effective Leadership

Among the principals there was a great deal of agreement as to the skills important to being an effective school leader. All of the skills identified were found to be very or somewhat important, with most being identified as very important (Table 13). Of these skill areas, the majority of principals felt they could use more training in the area of managing and analyzing data.

All of the principals discussed their data analysis strategies, and making data-driven decisions was a routine protocol throughout the district. In fact, most principals felt the data-backed decisions gave them more influence and control over their circumstances because the superintendent was willing to listen to and support a school's special needs or to approve of alternative methods if the principals were able to show, with data, that the decision would be better for a student than a district mandate. By empowering the principals through the use of data, the superintendent and district developed an environment in which data brought influence on decisions. Therefore, the better their understanding of how to manage and analyze data, the more influence they had over the leadership of their schools.

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

SOUTHEASTERN STATE	Public Schools	
SKILLS	% of Principals Who Indicated This Skill Was VERY IMPORTANT to Effective School Leadership	Of Those Who Indicated the Skill Is “very important,” the % of Principals Indicating They Could Use MORE TRAINING in This Area
Manage and analyze data	100.0%	66.7%
Communicate effectively (externally)	100.0%	33.3%
Communicate effectively (internally)	100.0%	16.7%
Evaluate classroom teachers	100.0%	16.7%
Build a community of support	100.0%	16.7%
Make data-driven decisions	100.0%	16.7%
Make decisions	100.0%	0.0%
Persevere in challenging situations	100.0%	0.0%
Develop and communicate a vision	100.0%	0.0%
Function in an environment of cultural differences	100.0%	0.0%
Manage teachers and staff	100.0%	0.0%
Develop a teacher/staff performance accountability system	100.0%	0.0%
Promote collegiality through collaboration	100.0%	0.0%
Resolve conflicts	100.0%	0.0%
Build a community of learners	83.3%	20.0%
Manage business and financial administration	83.3%	0.0%
Manage business and financial administration	83.3%	0.0%
Take risks	66.7%	25.0%
Experimentation	66.7%	0.0%
Evaluate curriculum	66.7%	0.0%

Interestingly, in open-ended response questions, principals were asked what skills they felt were essential to effective school leadership and what skills they admired in past mentors. Resourcefulness and an ability to reach out to the state and district were admired qualities. Also identified was the ability of these leaders to develop a vision but, more importantly, to engage staff and the community so they believed in that vision. Last, trust in their staff and the ability to convey that feeling of trust to the staff, along with an ability to empower staff, were also identified as powerful skills that helped these mentors to overcome barriers they faced.

IX. Conclusion

The principals interviewed were working in a managed instruction district in which many of the responsibilities of making decisions about scoping and sequencing, programs, texts, methods, and materials were made at the district level. Additionally, operational responsibilities, such as the custodians and lunchroom staff, were centralized to free up principals' time to be instructional leaders within their school. Despite the limitations in influence over these areas, principals generally did not find these to be serious barriers to their leadership. As the state is a right-to-work state, the principals did not have as much trouble with the hiring, transferring, and discharging of staff as those in states with teachers' unions. The process for discharging unsuitable staff was still long and arduous—but within the district's climate of support established by the superintendent, principals were more willing to follow this process if necessary. The areas of greatest concern were the principals' inability to control their budgets, the deficiencies that the district's funding formula brought to their schools, and consequently the principals' inability to make staffing decisions.

Effective School Leadership and Principals' Ability to Exercise School Leadership

The southeastern state's principals who were interviewed had a remarkable sense of their own ability to exercise school leadership despite problems with how the schools are funded. At least some of this sense of empowerment came from the superintendent's willingness to listen and support the principals. Principals believed that if they needed something and could provide the data to back up the need, the superintendent would approve and support them. As long as the deviation was within the confines of their budgets, the superintendent would allow them to make school-level decisions that benefited the school even if those decisions conflicted with the district's mandates. The straightforward and clear process for principals to garner the support of the district for their schools improved their general sense of their own effectiveness and abilities as school leaders.

Barriers

Major barriers for the principals were in the areas of budget and the district's organization. Budget issues impacted other areas such as programmatic decisions and staffing. Repeatedly, principals stated that the state/local formula for funding was a one-size-fits-all type of formula which did not account for the unique needs in a given school. According to the principals, the funding system allocated per-pupil expenditures and, after spending money on the things they had to pay for, a limited amount of discretionary funding was available. Also, the supplementary funds and the "allowable costs" in the district funding structure made it difficult to be flexible to allocate money and dollars in the areas that the principals felt was necessary (e.g., there was a student-to-teacher classroom ratio mandate that must be followed, therefore it was not possible to reallocate funds in areas that might be in greater need). The budget affected staffing because of the state-mandated teacher salaries (minimum threshold). Surrounding districts were tough competition for new and experienced teachers because they could supplement the state-mandated salary levels. Consequently, finding and keeping staff was difficult. In addition, teachers within their district were teaching in "more challenging" urban classrooms for less money. Lastly, although some flexibility exists as to how the federal Title I funds may be used, many of the principals felt the state's standards and requirements for the fund's expenditure limited their ability to pay for things that may be allowable costs under federal law but not under state law.

Another barrier identified by the principals was the district's organizational structure. The district was organized as a county that had one superintendent and several constituent superintendents who oversee regions within the county (a product of desegregation consolidation). These constituent superintendents are in charge of personnel decisions and are the principals' advocates within the district. It seems that the strength of a principal's constituent superintendent to advocate for the school affected the principal's sense of autonomy. This relationship was apparent particularly in making alternative program adoption decisions and using funds for alternative purposes that better reflect the school's needs. The relationship the principal had with the constituent superintendent was another important facet to the principal's sense of influence over her circumstances.

Additionally, the county/constituent superintendent organization was alluded to as part of the challenge within the district because the extra layer of bureaucracy lessened the principal's ability to respond to unique local needs. Finally, the district had centralized many of the operational functions of the school, such as maintenance, custodial, and lunchroom services. Although many of the principals accepted this change as being positive, some mentioned the awkwardness of being responsible for their schools yet having no control over the custodians or lunch service providers. Rather, the principals had to go through the central office to "get anything done within their school." Although the response time after they made requests was acceptable, they felt hesitant to wholeheartedly endorse this system.

Skills for Effective School Leaders

It was clear that the southeastern state's principals have a real sense that the role of an effective school leader requires a variety of skills and the ability to apply these skills on demand. Communication, managing staff and budgets, making decisions, evaluating teachers, promoting collegiality through collaboration, and functioning in an environment of differences were all highlighted in the principal interviews in surveys. The area in which the principals felt they could use the most training was in the ability to manage and analyze data, which is reflective of the way in which the district operates—data must be shown to support school-level decisions.