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COMMENTARY

Responding to Principals' Rising Responsibilities

By Duncan Young and Susan Szachowicz

Principals, we feel your pain.

One of the most noteworthy education trends in recent years has been the increase in demands placed on principals. With numerous mandates to implement, a move toward decentralized decisionmaking that puts more authority in their hands, and an education landscape that is rapidly changing—including more pervasive technology and evolving student demographics—the challenges of effective school leadership have never been greater. It's not an exaggeration to say that the success of the current round of education reform initiatives will be largely dictated by the success of our principals.

The importance of school leadership is clearly seen in research, including a recent study by Gregory F. Branch, Eric A. Hanushek, and Steven G. Rivkin. They reported in *Education Next* that a highly effective principal raises student achievement by between two and seven additional months of learning in a single school year.

With so much riding on a principal's abilities, we felt it was time to examine some of the pressing challenges they face and how policymakers and practitioners might respond. In his work with Scholastic Achievement Partners, one of us—Duncan—has witnessed these rising demands. And Sue, as a former principal and now a partner in Duncan's work, has felt the pressures firsthand. The challenges principals routinely face include:

The attack of the mandates. The word "mandate" has a sinister sound to it. Principals have always had mandates—federal, state, and district. But never have there been so many mandates being implemented simultaneously. Two of the most notable examples are the shift to the Common Core State Standards and the coming related assessments, and the implementation of new, more rigorous teacher-evaluation systems in many states.

The problem with this? Effectively taking on any single mandate is tough. But implementing both the common core and teacher-evaluation systems simultaneously can prove a mighty challenge for even the most seasoned principals. And doing all of this while managing previously existing mandates, from grants to accreditation, can seem overwhelming.

Not only are these initiatives complex and multifaceted, but, if not implemented with care, they can also be seen by teachers as working in conflict, not in concert, with one another. And since most mandates tend to have separate reporting requirements, the reporting load alone can be a daunting and time-intensive task.

That cry for help you hear? It's a nearby principal struggling to complete reams of paperwork.

A less experienced principal corps. Principals are in the middle of a great demographic shift. The recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher indicated that, in 2012, principals had 12.5 years of teaching experience on average, some states, these trends appear to be accelerating.

These new principals may have been incredible teachers, but might not yet have the training, skills, and support in instructional leadership necessary to lead schoolwide achievement. Many veteran principals are stunned at the lack

of training given to new principals. Turnover remains a constant source of concern as well, says Sue Gendron, a former education commissioner in Maine. (She is a senior fellow with the International Center for Leadership in Education, a part of Scholastic Achievement Partners.)

"I remember an experience I had when we were rolling out our new standards," she told us. "A principal came up to me and put his hands up and said, 'I surrender. I can't accomplish what you want—I'm the fifth principal in five years.' This lack of continuity is having staggering impacts on schools."

"D" is for "decentralization." As districts shift to decentralized decisionmaking, more budgetary and other control is being given to school leaders instead of the district office. There are important benefits to doing this, including making use of local knowledge, the chance for innovation, and decreased bureaucracy. However, this change introduces the risk of schools' operating without a strong overarching instructional vision or worse, without a strong transfer of best practices across schools.

Striking this balance is a key challenge for central offices. With what level of decentralization can principals be the most successful? And how does a central office avoid sending mixed messages (e.g., by encouraging principal initiative on the one hand while mandating a time-intensive districtwide assessment schedule on the other)? It's time for action. Principals need direct and systematic support in building their instructional-leadership skills. This support includes specific guidance and best practices on defining an instructional vision, in identifying what good and poor instruction looks like, in effectively using data for decisionmaking, and in engaging families and the community in the student-achievement process.

While this is crucially important for new principals, it is equally important that experienced principals have a chance for ongoing support. For inspiration, let's look to formal, success-based teacher-induction models and implement equivalent programs for principals, consisting of professional learning covering key principles, in-person or virtual coaching, and collaboration with peers in a confidential setting.

Second, let's get radical with how we think about principal preparation and ongoing support, moving away from the compliance-driven approach of the past 50 years, with its checklists of coursework and federal requirements. Let's shift to a more pragmatic approach that includes not just rethinking what initial principal training looks like—more hands-on, more performance-based—but also rigorous ongoing support and coaching from someone who has walked a mile in their shoes. And let's look at other professional fields, like medicine and law, for extensive examples to draw on.

Third, principals need specific guidance in how to make connections across the many mandates being implemented in their schools. Districts should work to create links, for example, between common-core rollouts and the implementation of new teacher-evaluation protocols. Additionally, districts should provide a model for how to communicate these initiatives to teachers as vital interconnected pieces of reform, not disconnected parts. Importantly, principals and teachers should be involved in this process and feel ownership of the results.

Fourth, districts should evaluate their policies around decentralization to ensure that their model is supported by the experience level of their principals. Already, hybrid models are emerging that give more power to local schools, while maintaining a set of district-level initiatives on the most critical, complicated issues.

Finally, central offices should evaluate the fundamental role they play for school leaders and shift from a model of oversight to a model of support. Too often, "central office" is seen by principals as equating to "compliance office," where the primary role is to communicate the mandates downward and collect the corresponding reports upward. Shifting district offices to a model of principal-centered support in which challenges are systematically identified and barriers removed can make a huge difference.

Implementing these best practices can meaningfully improve the quality of support provided to principals and increase their chances of success. And while they might still feel the pain, there will be a much greater likelihood that a gain goes along with it.

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