Recommendations from Principals of Highly Successful Schools Regarding Principal Preparation
Vicki N. Petzko

The purpose of this article is to identify topics that principals of highly successful middle level schools perceive as important in principal preparation programs, and to make recommendations for policy and curricular changes based on those recommendations. The importance assigned to topics of study in graduate programs by principals of highly successful schools is compared to that of a national sample. Topics both groups agree on as very important are identified and examined, as are topics about which there is discrepancy. Topics considered not important are also recognized and analyzed. Implications are considered and recommendations made for graduate programs in school leadership.

It was more than a decade ago that Turning Points (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) asserted that teachers of middle level students were best served by professional preparation specifically tuned to the intellectual and emotional developmental levels of early adolescents. Over 10 years later, in Turning Points 2000, Jackson and Davis concurred, arguing that “programs geared toward the specialized preparation of middle grades educators will produce expert educators who are best qualified to teach young adolescents” (p. 96). Despite the wide support for this conviction, there has been little or no inclination toward the same type of expectation for principals of middle level schools. In 2000, only seven states had special licensure programs for middle level principals (Gaskill, 2002). In the same year, only 4% of the middle level principals in a national survey held middle level administrative licensure, a decrease from 16% in 1992 (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002). In the absence of a successful grassroots movement to change legislation or state requirements, it is important that principal preparation programs look at what is specifically needed regarding middle level preparation, even if within a K–12 licensure umbrella. The purpose of this article is to identify areas that principals of highly
successful middle level schools perceive as important in principal preparation programs, and to make recommendations for policy and curricular changes based on those recommendations.

These endorsements are examined through an in-depth analysis and synthesis of the data on pre-professional development for aspiring principals from the National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools, Volumes I and II (Valentine et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 2004). Although some of the data was presented in the previously mentioned reports, this article presents additional data and a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis as well as recommendations for graduate programs in educational leadership.

Research Design

The research design for the National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools, Volumes I and II was conceptualized as the third of three “decade studies,” sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), which focused on middle level schools and their leaders. Consistent with the NASSP studies conducted in 1981 and 1993 (Valentine et al., 1981; Valentine et al., 1993), middle level schools were defined as those serving young adolescents in any structural combination of grades 5–9. In the initial phase of the study, principals of all middle level schools in the United States were invited, by mail, to participate in an online collection of survey data. Over 1,400 principals completed the questionnaire during the spring and summer of 2000.¹ The results of this

¹ To ensure data integrity, a post-study data analysis was conducted on grade organizational patterns, community type, and gender, including an analysis of respondents, non-respondents, and comparison of responses from the first 100 and last 100 completed returns (Valentine & Lucas, 2001). An examination of the grade organizational patterns represented by respondents showed no significant differences from the total population of 14,107 middle level schools. Analysis of community type disclosed a slight underrepresentation of urban schools. Rural schools were slightly over-represented. Post-study data analysis suggested that males
survey identified programs, practices and leadership in middle level schools at the turn of the century, and identified trends and implications which emerged when the 2000 data were compared to 1992, 1980, and in some cases, 1965 (Valentine et. al., 2002).

Phase II data collection began immediately after the collection of Phase I data. The purpose of Phase II of the study was to identify highly successful middle level schools and analyze their programs, practices, and leadership characteristics in isolation as well as in comparison to the national sample. A call for nominations was initially sent to education officials and higher education faculty members in each state. Nominators were asked to identify one or more schools that were, in their opinion, highly successful, and to describe how each school was exemplary in the way it addressed any one component of the Turning Points 2000 criteria (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Nominated schools were asked to complete a comprehensive questionnaire which addressed five specific areas: 1) the process by which change had come about in that school, 2) the school’s values, beliefs, vision, mission, and goals, 3) the unique challenges faced by the school, 4) student outcomes that demonstrate the school’s success, and 5) implementation of each of the recommendations from Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000). In addition, parents, teachers, and students were asked to respond to specific surveys addressing their perceptions of the school’s programs and practices. There were 273 schools nominated, representing all 50 states.

Scoring rubrics were developed for each question, and potential raters were tested for interrater reliability. Only raters with reliability scores of .90 or higher were permitted to score responses. Data from the nominated schools were analyzed through the use of...

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were somewhat over-represented in this sample; male principals completed 75% of the returns, while female
rubrics developed for each question. Recommendations were based on the following scale: 4 = the school clearly belonged in the set of 100 highly successful schools; 3 = the school should be given careful consideration; 2 = the school appeared to be lacking exemplary qualities needed, and 1 = the school clearly does not belong in the set of highly successful schools. Every school was rated by at least two raters; if a school was rated by one rater as a “2” and another as a “3”, a third rater was added. Every school identified by both raters as a 2 or below was juried by a review panel of four members. Schools were ranked according to total scores, and then further analyzed and selected with respect to scores as well as geographic dispersion. Of the 100 schools that were selected, the school boards of two schools declined participation.

The initial analysis of the highly successful schools compared their responses on the 2000 survey to that of the national sample. Demographics, programs, practices, and leadership were compared across the two samples. These results were reported in chapter 2 of Volume II of the study (Valentine et. al., 2004).

Following the identification of 98 highly successful schools and further analysis of the data, six schools were selected as “site-visit schools”. The selection of these schools was not meant to serve as an identification of the six most successful schools. Rather, these schools were selected as representative of the category of the 98 highly successful schools. School size, community economics, diversity, geographic location, and other special features were considered in the selection process. These six schools were each visited by two or three members of the NSLMLS research team for a 3-day site visit. Additional data principals completed 25%.
were collected and are presented in chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Volume II (Valentine et al., 2004).

This article examines what principals of highly successful schools recommend for the preparation of middle level principals. It begins with a summary comparison of the principals of highly successful schools to the national sample, compares the professional preparation of the two groups of school leaders, and then focuses on a comparison of their recommendations for the preparation of future middle level leaders. Results are reported and comparisons made between the highly successful schools and the national sample regarding the topics considered the most and the least essential for principal preparation programs. It also looks at where the largest discrepancies existed between recommendations of principals of highly successful schools compared to the national sample. Recommendations are made for graduate programs in educational leadership.

**Results**

Principals were presented with 22 components typically included in administrative licensure programs and asked to rank the value of these topics as essential, very useful, somewhat useful, or not useful to the preparation of middle level principals (see Table 1). The results were analyzed and are discussed here with reference to the following: highest- and lowest-ranked items from both groups and items that produced the largest discrepancies. The article concludes with implications and recommendations for graduate programs in principal preparation.

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2 For complete information on the research design for Phase II of the NSLMLS, see Valentine et al, 2004.
### Table 1. Principal Recommendations for the Preparation of Middle Level Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Average HSS*</th>
<th>Average NSS*</th>
<th>% Very Useful</th>
<th>% Essential</th>
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*Average based on a 4-point scale where 1 = not useful, 2 = somewhat useful, 3 = very useful, and 4 = essential.

**Personal/Professional Characteristics of the Principals of the Two Sets of Schools**

The majority of principals in both the highly successful schools and the national sample were Caucasian and over 50 years of age. A much larger percentage of the highly successful school principals were female (52%, compared to 27% of the national sample). There were few differences in the race or ethnicity of the principals of the two groups. Both males and females in highly successful schools were consistently appointed to administrative positions at a younger age than were their national sample counterparts.

Principals of highly successful schools had been principals longer and had generally served as principals in their current schools for a longer period of time than had their national sample counterparts (Valentine et. al., 2004).

Other than gender, age of administrative appointment, and position longevity, elements of the professional backgrounds of the two groups of principals were far more similar than they were different. The largest number of principals in both groups had served as an assistant principal at some grade level; however, it was striking to note that close to 20% had never held such a position and close to 40% had never held the position of middle
level assistant principal. Most people in both groups were not certified specifically as middle level principals. Almost half held K–12 certification and 39% held secondary certification. The most noticeable difference in academic preparation was that almost twice as many highly successful school principals held a doctorate than did the respondents in the national sample (Valentine et al., 2004).

*Highest-Ranked Items From Both Groups*

**Interpersonal relationships.** Bolman and Deal (1993) stated that the quality of a principal’s leadership depends on the quality of his or her relationships with the entire school community. Jackson and Davis (2000) called for principals to genuinely collaborate with teachers on important matters. Principals from both highly successful schools and the national sample affirmed these assertions, both ranking the skill of “developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships” as the most essential competency to be included in principal preparation programs. This priority was corroborated by the site-visit principals who believed that “the number one thing is relationships” (Valentine et al., 2004). In one school, several teachers described their climate as that of a “family.” One of the principals summarized the importance of healthy relationships and an understanding of faculty members’ needs by stating, “Remember that some people need a pat on the back, some need a kick in the pants, and some need both. Some need to be celebrated for the smallest of strides and other people need to be challenged … I probably can’t summarize it any better than that.”

**Staff supervision and evaluation.** Staff supervision and evaluation were ranked as another of the top items for highly successful school principals and as the second highest
item for the national sample. Sixty-two percent of the principals of highly successful schools and 60% of the national sample identified the skills as “essential” to principal preparation programs. Once again, these results validate what has been widely heralded in the literature and the press, that teacher quality is the single most important factor in assuring success for every student. The ability of a leader to assess teacher quality, evaluate effective instructional strategies, provide constructive criticism, design appropriate professional development activities and model and inspire continuous improvement are crucial to the success of a school. They are highly regarded by both groups of middle level principals as extremely useful components of the content of principal preparation programs. The importance of a commitment to lifelong learning, the establishment of a learning community, and a professional development plan which is tied explicitly to the school improvement plan are each essential elements of staff supervision and evaluation and crucially important components of principal preparation programs.

**Secondary Recommendations**

Collaborative decision making, instructional leadership, organizational development and the change process, and oral and written communication were all ranked as 3.5 or higher by principals of highly successful schools. Each of these issues was also assessed as more than “very useful” by the national sample of principals, although other content areas were ranked higher by that group. The assessment of the principals of highly successful schools, in conjunction with the recommendations of current literature and research, makes a strong case for the emphasis of these concepts in principal preparations programs.
Collaborative Decision Making

Turning Points 2000 recommended that a middle level school should function through a
democratic governance system that is systematically inclusive, collaborative, and focused
on the improvement of student learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This We Believe
(National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995) called for family and community
partnerships as well as a written mission statement that is supported by all stakeholders.

Schools that Work (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform [NFAMGR],
n.d.) criteria called for shared and sustained leadership, the engagement of all stakeholders
in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, decision making, and the
creation of networks and community partnerships that benefit students’ and teachers’
development and learning. The principals of the highly successful schools in this study
agreed that the skill of collaboration was, in fact, the competency that was third most
important in the preparation of middle level principals, with 62% recognizing it as
“essential” to preparation programs. The site-visit principals validated the importance of
shared leadership in middle level schools. One described the importance of having
stakeholders involved in the decision making as “the bottom line,” recognizing that:

When I first became a principal I didn’t use participatory management to the extent
that I should. I did not make the most of it. I use that more [now] and trust people I
work with to make good decisions and help achieve our goals, when I used to think
it all rested on me.

Instructional Leadership

The principals of both the national sample and the highly successful schools identified
instructional leadership as an area highly recommended for the preparation of middle level
principals. Sixty-two percent of the principals of highly successful schools and 49% of the national sample ranked this as an “essential” skill, while 35% of the highly successful schools and 31% of the national sample ranked it as “very useful.” Principals in this study clearly valued the *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) premise that “the sustained improvement of middle grades school students’ learning requires a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching” (p. 158). Their recommendation confirms the statement by Joseph Schneider, Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, that “an increased focus on instructional leadership is long overdue in educational administrator training programs” (Murphy, 2001, p. 17) and further supports the foundation of the second standard of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), that a “school administrator is an educational leader who promotes success for all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conductive to student learning and to staff professional growth” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 14).

**Organizational Development and the Change Process**

Jackson and Davis (2000) asserted that the effective principal cannot only be a “school ‘manager’” but must also “take on the role of ‘principal change agent’” (p. 156). The *Skill Competencies for Developing Educational Leaders* (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2004a) similarly identifies “handling resistance to change” as one of several major skill competencies for developing educational leaders. What this means to a school principal is that he or she must be able to bring about change in a school by anticipating problems, meeting needs, and sharing decision making. Principals of the
highly successful schools recognized that knowledge of these skills and concepts were a high priority in principal preparation: 58% said these were “essential” to the process and another 35% assessed them as “very useful.” They ranked the skill area as a 3.51 on the “usefulness” scale.

Discrepancies in Recommendations

An in depth analysis of the data presented in Table 1 also calls for discussion of how the recommendations from highly successful schools principals were different from those of the national sample. Recalling that the respondents from highly successful schools had been principals of their schools for a longer period of time, had been middle level principals longer, and had more background and knowledge in middle level best practices, the implications and conclusions warrant consideration.

Community/Parent Issues

The largest discrepancy in recommendations for the preparation of future principals was in the area of “community/parent issues.” Principals of highly successful schools rated this topic at a level above “very useful” (3.17), while principals in the national sample rated it “somewhat useful” (2.6), the greatest difference in the set of topics addressed. In another striking contrast, principals in the national sample saw “parents apathetic or irresponsible about their children” to be a larger roadblock to success than did the principals of highly successful schools (Valentine et al., 2004). While the categories are not identical, there is a basis for discussion about the relationship between the two sets of data.
While there is no empirically drawn conclusion in this research, the implication is clear: principals of highly successful schools consider the knowledge and skills related to working with parents and the community to be very useful in principal preparation programs. Principals in the six site-visit schools talked about how they worked hard to build strong relationships with parents and community members, including special commitment to bringing in parents who might otherwise have been disenfranchised from the educational institution. One of the principals from a visited school represented this commitment by stating, “I feel one of the strengths of our school is that we have to keep those parents informed regardless of their educational level. Regardless of whether they can read or write. Regardless of if they can speak English, I will get Ms. X to translate. We have to keep those parents on board.” Consistent with *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995), which calls for family and community partnerships, and the *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) commitment to involving parents and communities, principals of highly successful schools endorse the study of community and parent issues as very useful content in the preparation programs for middle level principals.

*Middle Level Best Practices*

“Middle level best practices” was ranked as a top component for principal preparation programs by principals of highly successful schools. In comparison, the national sample principals placed eight other components ahead of it, ranking it 0.4 lower. Similarly, principals of highly successful schools saw a “lack of knowledge among staff regarding programs for middle level students” as considerably less of a roadblock to success than did their national sample counterparts (Valentine et al., 2004). Although the cause of this
discrepancy is indeterminate, the incongruity itself calls for consideration. The importance of structures, programs, practices, and instructional strategies that address the unique needs of early adolescents is axiomatic to the middle level movement. *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995) are grounded in the bedrock belief that middle level schools must be focused on the unique intellectual, academic, and developmental needs of the early adolescents which they serve. *Schools to Watch* (NFAMGR, n.d.) has identified this as one of several criteria in their selection process, stating that high-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence. The principals of highly successful schools in the NASSP study concur that knowledge of middle level best practices is an essential component of an effective principal preparation program.

Correspondingly, although principals of highly successful schools were not more likely to have middle level principals licensure than the national sample (5% compared to 4%, respectively), they had completed substantially more coursework in middle level education than had their counterparts. The largest group of highly successful school principals (34%) had taken three to five such courses in middle level concepts, compared to 20% of the national sample. The largest group in the national sample, 37%, had taken no such classes (Valentine et al., 2004). The principals of highly successful schools felt that knowledge of best practices at the middle level was an essential component of a preparation program. So essential, in fact, that they sought such knowledge on their own. One of the principals of a visited school categorized the importance of her commitment to middle level concepts as follows: “Well, if you ask me why we were successful . . . I would say it is three things we have done. First, my knowledge of middle level practices so I can tell people.
And then, getting people in the school to understand and stick to it. And the third is enthusiasm. I think that is a biggie.”

Other Discrepancies

Other topics more highly rated by principals of highly successful schools than by the national sample were internships, site-based management, and standards-based reform. The observations regarding site-based management are similar to those in the previously presented discussion regarding collaboration: highly successful school principals ranked it as more important than did national sample school principals, and the literature and research corroborate that this skill is, indeed, crucial to a successful middle level school. The “internships” category is particularly interesting. While only 34.8% of the highly successful school principals felt that their internship experiences were of great value in their own preparation programs, 49% felt they were essential components of principal preparation programs. Similarly, but at a lesser scale, 29% of the national sample schools felt that their internships were of great value in their preparation programs, but 35% felt they were essential components of preparation programs (Valentine et al., 2002, p. 40). The implications appear to be consistent with the recommendations from other research, where it has been suggested that institutions of higher education provide meaningful middle level internships for prospective administrators. One principal stated, “I think that there should be part of the year devoted to on-the-job training, shadowing, watching these kids in action. I would say that certain shadowing or a practicum with a good middle school principal would be highly suggested” (Anfara & Brown, 2003, p. 209).
The difference in prioritization of “standards-based reform” as a topic of major concern to principal preparation programs also warrants attention (highly successful school principals ranked it at 3.16, national sample principals ranked it at 2.8). The discrepancy cannot be attributed to an increase in accountability between Phase 1 and Phase 2 data collection: the data from Table 1 was collected from both sets of principals in 2000. The fact that principals of highly successful schools rated this content area notably higher than did the national sample may imply that these principals emphasized accountability earlier, that they better understood the complex nature of high expectations for all, and/or that they saw more clearly that data-driven school reform was the key to school improvement. There is little or no disagreement in the literature, research, or national policy that the expectation for continuous improvement based on student achievement has become the cornerstone of early 21st century education. One principal in the NASSP study (Valentine et al., 2004) illustrated the importance of standards-driven reform, both through high-stakes testing as well as other measures:

“...Success was totally measured by a test because that is how everyone measured us.... So I hate to say it, but the test was the beginning of our focus.... But that meant to me it was the starting point for our continuous improvement. We started going beyond the test.... Second year, we got the taste of success. Third year, we nailed success. Then we started seeing what else we can do, so for the last four years, we have been going beyond what the test measured.... We have learned there is so much more to measure students by than the standardized test.” (p. 103)

It may be a statement of the obvious to say that attention to relationships, collaboration, staff supervision, instructional leadership, the change process, and middle level practices are highly important elements of principal preparation programs. However, what must be grasped for this to resonate is that these recommendations came from principals of highly
successful schools and, thus, carry a powerful endorsement. They support what the literature stipulates as well as what the professional standards demand. They focus on leadership—not management—and support the vision of the school principal as a person whose most effective tools are knowledge and influence, not power and authority.

Areas of Least Importance

Also crucial in this analysis is the identification of what topics the principals of both groups said were not as important to the principal preparation process. Principals of both the highly successful schools and the national sample schools in this study identified the study of foundations/theory, research methods, and school board relations/politics as less than “very useful” in the preparation for the principalship (below 3.0 average score). The results are consistent with waves of criticism frequently directed at graduate study, which allege that many programs focus on the research and academic dimensions of the profession to the near exclusion of actual practice (Murphy, 2001). While the scope of this study did not allow further qualitative analysis of the rationale behind these determinations, the strength of the recommendations compel those involved in principal preparation programs to investigate the value of the graduate student outcomes that ensue from the study of these topics.

Recommendations

Institutions of graduate-level education are typically held to a set of accreditation and professional standards as set by their state, ISLLC, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or the Educational Leadership Constituent Council. In some fashion,
each of these sets of standards includes the topics mentioned in this article. The strength of these data is that they cast some light on the question of priorities for graduate programs in educational leadership. This analysis dictates that such programs assess the weight of these topics in their own curriculum and consider their weight as compared to that recommended by these principals. Such an analysis might open some options and opportunities to decrease time and attention in some areas in order to emphasize others. If, for example, “Politics” is an entire course, but “Collaboration” only a part of another, a discussion should ensue. If “Research” or “Theory” are stand-alone courses but “Organizational Development and Change” is not, another investigation is needed. If the program leads to K–12 licensing and there is little attention to the specific recommendations for programs and practices at the middle level, further examination is needed. If an internship is required, assessment should be done as to its substance and effectiveness. The data in this study supports other research (e.g., Anfara & Brown, 2003), which has stated, “Many middle school principals described their programs as inadequate, impractical and unrealistic. Several commented about the disconnection between what they were taught and what they needed to know in the world of practice” (p. 206).

With an anticipated national shortage of principals, the increasingly challenging nature of the position, and ever-increasing needs of the students who are served, the future leaders of middle level schools deserve and must demand the best preparation the field can deliver. If the quality of a school reflects the quality of its leader, as Gerald Tirozzi, Executive Director of NASSP, has stated, reform in principal preparation programs may be a prerequisite to reform and continued improvement in middle level education (NASSP, 2004b).
References


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