

Call to Action for Superintendents: Change the Way You Hire Principals

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ABSTRACT Accountability is a high priority in the U.S. education system, and principals play an important role in student achievement. The author examined the means by which superintendents focus on characteristics identified in the literature on effective principals and student achievement when hiring building administrators. The author questioned whether superintendents considered and assessed candidates for the 21 responsibilities of successful principals identified by T. Waters, R. Marzano, and B. McNulty (2004). Results indicated that although superintendents agreed on the key characteristics necessary for principals to succeed, they did not have a credible way to measure the characteristics in the hiring process. In addition, superintendents need to revise their hiring processes to assess those characteristics correlated in principal applicants to improved student achievement.

Keywords: hiring processes for principals, responsibilities for successful principals, school superintendents

Public education is facing significant scrutiny, coupled with demands for accountability and increased student achievement. Much of that attention can be traced to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The federal government has historically provided only token involvement in the day-to-day operations of public schools, with the exception of laws governing special education. Under NCLB, all public schools must test students in Grades 3 through 8 and Grade 10 in core content areas.

The law mandates that every school must demonstrate annual progress toward the goal that all students perform on standardized tests at a proficient or advanced level in the content areas by 2014. Each state must establish grade-level benchmarks of achievement, and schools across the country must report student test scores by school. With the passage of NCLB, the federal government stepped directly into the classroom of every public school in the country. The law added vigorous accountability standards to schools and outlined serious consequences for schools not meeting these standards. One of the consequences a school may face if it does not meet student-achievement standards is removal of the principal. The addition of federal and state

accountability requirements has made the role of the building principal even more critical.

Given those standards, school districts and specifically superintendents must focus attention on maximizing strategies that will improve student achievement to at least meet federal achievement benchmarks. Principals have always been a critical component of effective schools and are now a critical component in meeting NCLB standards. Public school superintendents ultimately are responsible for the success or failure of the schools within their districts. Their jobs require that they put into place initiatives, policies, personnel, and strategies that support and improve student achievement. Principals must define the critical components that will raise student academic performance to meet NCLB standards by 2014. If principals are the linchpins of effective schools, then superintendents must select ideal candidates to fill these important roles.

In the 1970s and 1980s, educators in the effective schools movement identified the key role principals played in successful schools. Edmonds (1982) and Lezotte (1991) reported that effective schools have effective principals and that schools without effective principals falter. According to Cawelti (1984), "Continuing research on effective schools has verified the common sense observation that schools are rarely effective, in any sense of the word, unless the principal is a good leader" (p. 3).

In exploring students' reading achievement in 87 U.S. elementary schools and the principals' effects on achievement, Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) reported, "Even when using—in our opinion—an overly narrow criterion for defining effectiveness . . . the results support the notion that principals play an important role in school effectiveness" (p. 544). Teschke (1996) said, "Although the role of the school principal is changing—he or she is no longer the absolute authority figure in the school—the principal continues to be critically important in the estab-

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lishment of a good school" (p. 10). The importance of the principal is not limited to schools in the United States. Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2001) presented a similar view from the United Kingdom: "Not surprisingly, research has concluded that principals exercise a key role" (p. 39).

Combining the call for increased student performance and accountability and the continuous public dialogue about education has raised the expectations for school districts, especially school principals, to be more effective. That heightened visibility, responsibility, and accountability force school superintendents to be more effective in selecting the best possible candidates to serve as principals of their schools. There is much at stake, and principals are pivotal in dealing with the challenges of student achievement and expectations of the school community.

The literature concerning effective school principals describes skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities that effective principals should possess. There are references to student performance and speculations made about traits, behaviors, skills, responsibilities, and measurable student achievement. Although similarities exist in the research in terms of broad concepts related to effective principals, little agreement exists with respect to the descriptors used to identify these concepts. There is agreement in the literature that principals play a critical role in effective schools. Also, there are varying explanations of the traits, behaviors, skills, and responsibilities that effective principals possess or should possess.

Do Principals Play a Critical Role in Successful Schools?

The literature suggests that a principal plays a critical role in any successful school. "Recognition of the importance of principals . . . to school reform has been long-standing" (Cotton, 2003, p. v). Early research points to the relationship between effective schools and instructional leadership (Lezotte, 1992). In addition, Lezotte (1991) reported that the principal is a correlate of an effective school. Schools that are determined to be successful or effective have successful or effective principals (Sweeney, 1982). "The belief that principals have an impact on schools is long-standing in the folk wisdom of American educational history. Studies conducted in recent decades lend empirical support to lay wisdom" (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

In a successful school, one will find a successful principal, and a school that does not have a principal with leadership skills will flounder (Peterson, 1999). Whether measured in terms of effectiveness or productivity, principals play a key role (Bookbinder, 1992). In addition, McCurdy (1983) indicated that the role of the principal is far more critical than once believed. References in the literature concerning effectiveness are described as good schools, effective schools, productive schools, and successful schools.

For the last 25 years, all effective-schools (elementary, middle, secondary) researchers have reported that instruc-

tional leadership is critical (Lezotte, 1992). The study of leadership in effective schools suggests that (a) these schools are led by individuals who believe that learning in a democracy must be inclusive learning for all and (b) these individuals can communicate this belief so that others in the school can share the vision and commitment. The vision of principals cannot endure unless they can create a critical mass of support among those helping to implement it. If the principal hires teachers who also believe that schools in a democratic society must be committed to learning for all, the journey is easier and progress is realized more quickly. (Lezotte, 1992).

"Continuing research on effective schools has verified the common sense observation that schools are rarely effective, in any sense of the word, unless the principal is a good leader" (Cawelti, 1984, p. 3). Effective principals need to have a sense of vision, resourcefulness, a process of school improvement, instructional support, and knowledge about student performance in mathematics and composition. Principals also need to use that information to set new priorities for the school.

Edmonds (1982) described the following characteristics of an effective school:

- (1) The principal's leadership and attention to the quality of instruction;
- (2) a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus;
- (3) an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning;
- (4) teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; and
- (5) the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation. (p. 4)

Lezotte and Bancroft (1985) reported that "effective schools spend as much time avoiding things that don't work as they do gravitating to things that do" (p. 26). Schools may choose certain academic areas of focus, and the measures will be used to determine improvement that will represent areas that the school believes are important.

Two outcome standards are anticipated in effective schools. First, the overall level of achievement to which the students rise on the outcome measures must be sufficiently high to signify acceptable mastery of the essential curriculum. Second, the distribution of achievement must not vary significantly across major subsets of the student population; that is, middle socioeconomic students versus lower socioeconomic students. (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985, p. 27)

"Do principals make a difference? Practitioners and parents have long noted the seemingly obvious effects principals have on the learning climate, educational programs, and work place norms" (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996, p. 527). Gullatt and Lofton (1996) reported similar results: "Findings point to the fact that the school principal's instructional leadership behavior is also critical to the academic achievement of students" (p. 24). Hallinger and Heck (1996) wrote, "Given apparent support from the research community, policymakers now tend to view the principal as a key educational input, and one easily accessed through policy channels" (p. 6).

The Role of the Principal

In 1995, Cotton presented the third edition of a research synthesis centering on effective school practices through the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. In that edition, Cotton examined more than 1,000 sources published over the previous 5 years. Cotton reported, "Key factors in support of student success include efficient planning and clear goals, validated organization and management practices, strong leadership and continuous improvement" (para. 1).

Zigarelli (1996) examined the affects of six effective-school variables on student achievement with data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. The Department of Education developed a survey in conjunction with the National Opinion Research Center and the Educational Testing Service, which was administered to a panel of 8th-grade students in 1988, with follow-up surveys to the same students in 1990 and 1992 during the students' 10th- and 12th-grade years, respectively. Zigarelli established six constructs and correlated each of them independently with student achievement. He cited three characteristics that he determined were most important to effective schools: (a) establishment of an achievement-oriented school culture, (b) the ability of the principal to hire and fire teachers, and (c) high teacher morale.

Peterson (1999), Cotton (1995), Teske and Schneider (1999), Rosenthal (2003), and Day (2000) reported that a principal needs to set clear expectations for teachers, students, and the school in general. Some of those authors emphasized that those expectations must be high in addition to being clearly stated and understood. The ability to communicate is an attribute that effective principals must possess (McEwan 2003; Rosenthal; Whitaker, 1997; Teschke, 1996). Those authors agreed that an effective principal must shape the vision and mission of the school. Peterson, McEwan, and Day agreed that principals must shape the culture and climate of the school; providing resources is important, according to Whitaker and Cotton and Portin (2004). With those exceptions, researchers have expressed few commonalities about what effective or successful principals should do or be like.

Hallinger and Heck (1996) conducted a review of empirical studies of the role of the principal. The authors examined journal articles, dissertation studies, and peer-reviewed papers presented at conferences between 1980 and 1995. There were three criteria for the studies that Hallinger and Heck reviewed: First, "the research must have conceptualized and measured principal leadership as one of the independent variables. . . . Second, the studies also had to include an explicit measure of school performance as a dependent variable" (p. 10). Third, Hallinger and Heck included 11 out of 40 studies from outside the United States. Their results indicated the following:

These studies support the notion that principal leadership can make a difference in student learning. What these

studies further indicate, however, is that we must attend to the conditions under which this effect is achieved. Context, particularly facets of the school's socioeconomic environment, appears to influence the type of leadership that principals exercise. Unfortunately, the studies remain too disparate in their conceptualizations of leadership and context variables to specify the contingencies that come into play in this relationship. (p. 38)

Principals and Student Achievement

The critical link between effective principal characteristics and student achievement was forged by the work of Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2004) in their meta-analysis of more than 5,000 research studies published since the early 1970s. Of the 5,000 titles retrieved, 300 met their established criteria. Within those 300 studies, the authors found 69 studies that met their standards for rigor, design, controls, and data analysis. The criteria for a study to be included were ". . . quantitative student achievement data; student achievement measured on standardized, norm-referenced tests or some other objective measure of achievement; student achievement as the dependent variable; and teacher perceptions of leadership as the independent variable" (p. 5). The meta-analysis examined leadership in three databases: *Education Resources Information Clearinghouse*, *Psych Lit*, and *Dissertation Abstracts*. Waters et al. used studies from 1978–2001, which included 2,802 schools with approximately 1.4 million students and 14,000 teachers. "To our knowledge, this represents the largest sample of principals, teachers, and student achievement scores ever used to analyze the effects of educational leadership" (p. 5). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated, "We found no available studies that met our criteria prior to 1978 or after 2001." Thirty-nine studies focused on elementary schools, 6 focused on middle or junior high schools, 10 focused on high schools, 8 focused on K–8 districts, and 6 focused on K–12 districts. The typical study in the meta-analysis used a questionnaire asking teachers about their perceptions of the principal's leadership behaviors. The authors identified 21 responsibilities of effective school principals and correlated each of the responsibilities to student achievement. Table 1 lists the 21 responsibilities alphabetically.

The average correlation of the 21 responsibilities was .25. The authors imparted that the improvement of a principal on the 21 responsibilities by one standard deviation would translate to the improvement of student achievement from the 50th to the 60th percentile on standardized achievement test scores, which would be a significant gain.

Principals have always played an important role in education; however, the recent focus on improving academic achievement for all students has increased the need for superintendents to select the best possible individuals for these positions. Marzano et al. (2005) suggested,

At no time in recent memory has the need for effective and inspired leadership been more pressing than it is today. With increasing needs in our society and in the workplace

TABLE 1. Responsibilities of Effective Principals (T. Waters, R. Marzano, & B. McNulty, 2004)

Responsibility	Definition
Affirmation	Recognizes and celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges failure
Change agent	Is willing to actively challenge status quo
Communication	Establishes strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students
Contingent rewards	Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments
Culture	Fosters shared beliefs and sense of community
Discipline	Protects teachers from issues and influences that detract from their teaching time or focus
Flexibility	Adapts leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation; is comfortable with dissent
Focus	Establishes clear goals and keeps them in the forefront of the school's attention
Ideals/beliefs	Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling
Input	Involves teachers in design and implementation of important decisions and policies
Intellectual stimulation	Ensures faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices; makes discussion of these a regular aspect of school's culture
Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Is directly involved in design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment
Monitoring/evaluating	Monitors effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning
Optimizing	Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations
Order	Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines
Outreach	Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders
Relationship	Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff
Resources	Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for successful execution of their jobs
Situational awareness	Is aware of details and undercurrents in running the school and uses information to address current and potential problems
Visibility	Has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students

for knowledgeable, skilled, responsible citizens, the pressure on schools intensifies. The expectation that no child be left behind in a world and in an economy that will require everyone's best is not likely to subside. (p. 123)

Where Does the Superintendent Fit?

The obvious question is how the information on principals connects to superintendents. Superintendents are responsible for and actively involved in selecting and hiring principals. Therefore, if one can identify the responsibilities that principals should possess to affect positive student achievement, then it would be logical for superintendents to select candidates with these qualities. How do superintendents use the 21 responsibilities found in the literature concerning student achievement when they hire principals? I focused on the following two questions in this study:

1. How do superintendents consider the skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities identified in the literature for effective principals in their selection of school principals?
2. How do superintendents assess these skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities in the candidates whom they hire?

Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive survey study was to determine how superintendents consider the responsibilities associated with effective principals, specifically duties identified by Waters et al. (2004) and correlated with student achievement. In addition, I also examined how superintendents assess the responsibilities of candidates whom they are considering.

Method

Participants

Participants were all public school superintendents in Wisconsin. There were 442 public school districts listed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2004a). I eliminated superintendents in districts with student populations greater than 5,000 because those superintendents may have had minimal direct involvement in the hiring of principals. I also eliminated superintendents in districts with student populations fewer than 300 because those superintendents often were also the principals. The sampling population, therefore, consisted of 370 superintendents. With a sample population of 370, according to Suskie (1996) and the American Research Group (2000), a sample group of 200 would be required to obtain a sample error of 5%. The sample group of 200 superintendents was selected randomly, using an Excel spreadsheet, from the sample population of 370 superintendents.

The profile of the population was constructed from data published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2004a). Superintendents in the population were 98.1% White, not Hispanic; 0.9% American Indian; 0.5% Black; 0.2% Asian; and 0.2% Hispanic. There were 82.5% male and 17.5% female superintendents; average age was 53.5 years. The average administrative experience in the superintendents' current location was 8.5 years; total administrative experience was 26.1 years.

Instrument

I developed the survey instrument by using the Web-based survey tool <http://www.SurveyMonkey.com>; each of the 21 responsibilities became the basis for one question. I conducted the pilot study with a random sample of 40 superintendents taken from the sample population of 370 superintendents. The purpose of the pilot study was to (a) establish instrument reliability, (b) test the response rate of the survey, (c) identify problems with the electronic distribution or e-mail instructions of the survey, (d) identify problems with the survey questions, and (e) test the collection and technical manipulation of the data. Of the 40 surveys sent, 27 were returned, generating a 67.5% response rate. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the instrument was .89. Nunnally (1978) indicated that .70 and above is acceptable. The full study consisted of a random sample of 200 Wisconsin superintendents, with a 71% response rate.

I distributed an electronic rating survey to participants with Likert-type scale responses ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). According to Suskie (1996), a rating survey is generally familiar to most people and permits comparisons among respondents. "A rating scale is more useful when a behavior, attitude, or other phenomenon of interest is to be evaluated on a continuum of, say, 'inadequate' to 'excellent,' 'never' to 'always,' or 'strongly disapprove' to 'strongly approve'" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 185).

The survey consisted of two parts. First, for each of the 21 responsibilities, the superintendents responded to the statement, "When selecting/hiring a building principal, I consider this responsibility to be important." For each response marked *strongly agree* and *agree*, the superintendents described in narrative form how they assessed the responsibility of candidates whom they were interviewing. I established face and content validity with three public school superintendents and a group of doctoral students from Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The survey included the definitions for each of the 21 responsibilities for consistency of responses.

Procedures

The survey sample group constituted 200 districts from the sample population of 370 districts. I imported the 442 districts listed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2004a) into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I removed districts with student populations smaller than 300 and larger than 5,000 and the nonindependent school districts, as well as districts that shared a superintendent. In addition, I removed from the population districts used to establish face and content validity of the survey instrument and districts in which the superintendent served as the principal, resulting in a population of 370 districts. A set of random numbers was generated by Microsoft Excel and assigned to the 370 districts of the sample population. Two hundred districts with their corresponding superintendents were selected by ordering the random numbers as the sample population.

I sent the 200 randomly selected superintendents an e-mail with a cover letter that described the study. I obtained the e-mail addresses from the 2004–2005 Wisconsin School Directory (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2004b). A Web link in the e-mail instructions directed the participating superintendents to <http://www.surveymonkey.com> and the actual survey instrument. For districts in which electronic surveys could not be delivered, I sent a paper copy of the cover e-mail memorandum and survey by postal mail. I asked respondents to check the box that best reflected their consideration of the listed responsibility when selecting, choosing, or hiring a principal. For responsibilities that were marked *strongly agree* or *agree*, the superintendents explained the way they assessed that responsibility for the candidate whom they were considering. When the survey was completed, the Web link automatically returned the results to the Web site. Superintendents who did not respond within the timeline received follow-up reminders; three reminders were delivered by e-mail in 2-week intervals.

Data Analysis

I used descriptive statistics to describe the responses of the superintendents' consideration of the 21 responsibilities when hiring principals. To quantify the survey data, I used

constant comparative analysis (Dye, Scharzt, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000) to examine the narrative responses describing how superintendents assessed the responsibilities of principal candidates.

Results

The superintendents who responded clearly indicated that the 21 responsibilities were important to consider when hiring a principal. Table 2 contains the number of responses and percentages for each survey question and for each of the superintendent's response options.

More than 73.0% (100) of the respondents strongly agreed and 25.7% (35) agreed that communication is an important responsibility to consider when hiring a principal. Only one respondent (0.7%) disagreed that communication is an important responsibility to consider; no respondent strongly disagreed.

Only four responsibilities were marked *strongly disagree* by one superintendent each. The four responsibilities were (a) affirmation—the principal recognizes and celebrates

accomplishments and acknowledges failures, (b) change agent—the principal is willing to and actively challenges the status quo, (c) contingent rewards—the principal recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments, and (d) relationship—the principal demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff. Each of the four responsibilities was marked strongly disagree by one respondent, representing 0.1% of the total responses.

Table 3 shows the superintendents' responses to the survey questions related to the 21 responsibilities and includes the combined responses for *strongly agree* and *agree*. When examining the combined responses, 92% of the superintendents indicated that the 21 responsibilities were important to consider when hiring principals. The range of responses was communication (99.3%) to discipline (81.4%). The data indicate the value that the superintendents placed on the specific responsibilities.

In terms of superintendents' considering qualities that principals should possess related to improving student achievement, my findings are encouraging. The key question is whether superintendents identify those qualities in candidates.

TABLE 2. Responses by All Participants to Survey Questions Relating to the 21 Responsibilities

Responsibility	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Communication	100	73.5	35	25.7	1	0.7	0	0.0	136
Visibility	75	59.5	47	37.3	4	3.2	0	0.0	126
Focus	64	48.5	64	48.5	4	3.0	0	0.0	132
Culture	60	45.1	70	52.6	3	2.3	0	0.0	133
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	54	42.9	66	52.4	6	4.8	0	0.0	126
Monitoring/evaluating	53	40.8	70	53.8	7	5.4	0	0.0	130
Outreach	51	39.8	74	57.8	3	2.3	0	0.0	128
Affirmation	54	39.1	77	55.8	6	4.3	1	0.7	138
Flexibility	49	37.4	69	52.7	13	9.9	0	0.0	131
Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	49	37.1	76	57.6	7	5.3	0	0.0	132
Change agent	51	36.9	72	54.6	10	7.7	1	0.8	134
Situational awareness	46	36.2	67	52.8	14	11.0	0	0.0	127
Input	47	35.6	80	60.6	5	3.8	0	0.0	132
Ideals/beliefs	45	33.8	79	59.4	9	6.8	0	0.0	133
Contingent rewards	36	26.5	88	64.7	11	8.1	1	0.7	136
Optimizing	33	25.6	82	63.6	14	10.9	0	0.0	129
Resources	28	22.2	80	63.5	18	14.3	0	0.0	126
Intellectual stimulation	25	18.9	85	64.4	22	16.7	0	0.0	132
Relationship	24	18.9	82	64.6	20	15.7	1	0.8	127
Order	22	17.3	91	71.7	14	11.0	0	0.0	127
Discipline	15	11.6	90	69.8	24	18.6	0	0.0	129

TABLE 3. Combined Responses to Survey Questions Relating to the 21 Responsibilities

Responsibility	Strongly agree and agree	
	n	%
Communication	135	99.3
Culture	130	97.7
Outreach	125	97.7
Focus	128	97.0
Visibility	122	96.8
Input	127	96.2
Knowledge of curriculum	120	95.2
Affirmation	131	94.9
Involvement in curriculum	125	94.7
Monitoring/evaluating	123	94.6
Ideals/beliefs	124	93.2
Change agent	123	91.8
Contingent rewards	124	91.2
Flexibility	118	90.1
Optimizing	115	89.1
Situational awareness	113	89.0
Order	113	89.0
Resources	108	85.7
Relationship	106	83.5
Intellectual stimulation	110	83.3
Discipline	105	81.4
Total	2,525	92.0

Note. Responses are listed by descending mean score of strongly agree and agree.

Do Superintendents Purposefully Assess Candidate Qualities?

Although superintendents reported that the 21 responsibilities identified by Waters et al. (2004) were important, they did not describe purposeful or intentional means to assess those responsibilities in principal candidates. Responses to the second question of the study described how the superintendents assessed the 21 responsibilities of candidates for principal positions. Narrative responses were generated when the superintendents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the responsibility was important to consider when hiring a principal. The survey prompt asked participants to describe the way they would assess responsibility in a candidate.

I used constant comparative analysis to examine the 1,592 narrative responses I received. An initial examination of the survey answers indicated that the superintendents reported four basic responses to the question. The superintendents reported that they assessed the responsibilities (a) through the interview, (b) from materials presented by the candidate, (c) from references of the candidate, or (d) by designing a specific method of assessing the responsibility. In some cases, the superintendents did not have a means of assessing the responsibility.

Table 4 shows the narrative responses summary; the 21 responsibilities are listed alphabetically. The five response categories are listed with the number of responses (*n*) and the percentage for each responsibility. The category "No Assessment" reflects a narrative response made by a superintendent who did not directly assess one of the responsibilities. The column "Specific Assessment" reflects a response by a superintendent who described a specific, intentional means to assess one of the responsibilities.

Of the superintendents providing written comments and who assessed the candidates through the interview, the highest percentage of responses (45.9%, *n* = 45) was for the responsibility of affirmation; the lowest percentage of responses was for discipline (17.5%, *n* = 3). The range of percentages for superintendents who assessed the responsibilities by checking references ranged from a high of 32.5% (*n* = 26) to a low of 10.1% (*n* = 7). The range of responses for superintendents who reviewed materials to determine a candidate's possession of responsibilities ranged from a high of 22.0% (*n* = 20) to a low of 2.8% (*n* = 2). Superintendents who reported a specific means of assessing a responsibility in a candidate ranged from a high of 4.4% (*n* = 4) to a low of 0%. Superintendents who reported no means of assessing responsibilities ranged from a high of 68.9% (*n* = 51) to a low of 36.4% (*n* = 43). In the No Assessment category, more than half of superintendents reported that in 16 of the 21 (71.2%) responsibilities, they had no way of determining whether the candidate possessed the responsibility that was important.

There was a significant caveat to the answers. In the case of assessing responsibilities from an interview, materials, or references, the superintendents' use of these three means was passive. If a candidate happened to mention one of the responsibilities during the interview or in materials presented, the superintendent might consider the quality in the hiring decision. That decision would be juxtaposed with intentionally developing a method of determining whether a candidate possessed the responsibility.

A major finding from the narrative-response analysis was that 56.2% (893) of responding superintendents indicated that they did not have specific means of identifying the responsibilities in candidates whom they were considering to hire as principals. Combining that finding with the passive assessments that were not actual assessments, only 1.2% (*n* = 19) of superintendents reported having a purposeful or intentional means of assessing 1 of the 21 responsibilities in candidates.

Discussion

The majority of superintendents (92.0%, of 2,525 responses) reported that the 21 responsibilities identified by Waters et al. (2004) were important to consider when hiring principals. Only 7.8% (*n* = 215) of the respondents disagreed that the responsibilities were important; only

TABLE 4. Narrative Response Summary—Methods of Assessing the 21 Responsibilities of Principal Candidates

Responsibility	Interview		Reference		Materials		No assessment		Specific assessment	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Affirmation	45	45.9	28	28.3	17	17.2	43	36.4	1	1.0
Change agent	27	29.7	15	16.5	4	4.4	49	63.6	4	4.4
Communication	29	31.9	25	27.5	20	22.0	55	56.1	0	0.0
Contingent reward	17	21.5	16	20.3	6	7.6	49	63.6	1	1.3
Culture	22	31.9	19	27.5	20	22.0	53	63.9	2	2.4
Discipline	13	17.6	13	17.6	7	9.5	51	68.9	3	4.1
Flexibility	33	41.3	26	32.5	8	10.0	38	46.9	0	0.0
Focus	30	35.7	21	25.0	11	13.1	47	56.0	0	0.0
Ideal/beliefs	29	33.7	10	11.6	8	9.3	43	56.6	0	0.0
Input	24	28.9	17	20.5	6	7.2	53	63.9	0	0.0
Intellectual stimulation	26	37.7	7	10.1	4	5.8	41	59.4	0	0.0
Involvement in curriculum	32	41.6	15	19.5	11	14.3	38	49.4	1	1.3
Knowledge of curriculum	29	43.3	14	20.9	11	16.4	34	50.7	1	1.5
Monitor/evaluate	24	33.8	11	15.5	5	7.0	42	59.2	3	4.2
Optimizing	23	33.8	15	22.7	7	10.6	39	59.1	0	0.0
Order	25	38.5	17	26.2	5	7.7	31	47.7	0	0.0
Outreach	26	34.7	18	24.0	8	10.7	40	53.3	0	0.0
Relationships	19	33.3	17	29.8	5	8.8	34	57.6	0	0.0
Resources	16	25.8	11	17.7	6	9.7	42	67.7	0	0.0
Situational awareness	19	31.1	14	23.0	2	3.3	38	62.3	0	0.0
Visibility	23	31.9	26	36.1	2	2.8	32	44.4	3	4.2
Total	525	33.0	360	22.6	163	10.2	893	56.2	19	1.2

0.01% ($n = 4$) of the respondents strongly disagreed that any of the responsibilities were important to consider.

Given that Waters et al. (2004) established correlations between the 21 responsibilities and student achievement, the data are encouraging with respect to having principals who possess these responsibilities. Acknowledging the superintendents' reported beliefs in the significance of the 21 responsibilities, one could reasonably intuit that the superintendents may be looking for these responsibilities during the hiring process. Being able to identify and recognize the responsibilities when a candidate is answering interview questions would be valuable during the hiring process. For example, a superintendent may take stock of a candidate's communication skills throughout the selection process and base a portion of the hiring decision on that information.

The second question of the study, which addressed the manner in which superintendents assess the 21 responsibilities in principal candidates, was critical. The response to that question was that superintendents do not have any systematic, intentional, or purposeful means of determining whether candidates possess any of the 21 responsibilities when hiring principals. Passively waiting to see whether a candidate mentions one of the responsibilities is not

making an assessment. Rather, that would be like asking students in a mathematics class to talk about their experiences in class and waiting for them to explain how to factor a quadratic equation, then using that response as the basis for their final mathematics grade.

Summary

Superintendents in Wisconsin consider the 21 responsibilities identified by Waters et al. (2004) very important. The data of this study were also clear: Superintendents in Wisconsin do not have systematic, intentional, or methodical means to assess the responsibilities in candidates who are being considered as principals. Assuming that superintendents in other states have characteristics similar to the superintendents in Wisconsin, the criteria used to select principals nationally would appear to lack purposeful design. Certainly, there are principals who possess the 21 responsibilities working in public schools in Wisconsin and across the country. That may be the result of skillful superintendents and the role they play in the selection process. Although the 21 responsibilities correlated with student achievement are important, each school also presents unique characteristics that

may require varying amounts of the 21 responsibilities for principals to be successful. In choosing a principal, a skilled superintendent weighs the needs of the school and the district and matches the candidate's profile accordingly. Superintendents, by their position, generally have a great deal of experience and understand the variables in their district (location, socioeconomic makeup), the needs of the school, and which skills the new principal should possess to be successful. Therefore, the success of the principal selection process may relate directly to the skills of the superintendent and his or her ability to identify the responsibilities in candidates if and when they are presented, as well as the superintendent's understanding of his or her district. In many cases, good superintendents intuitively understand the qualities necessary for principals to be successful. When candidates demonstrate or describe the desired traits, superintendents recognize those qualities and hire the appropriate candidate.

Although the results of this study indicated that superintendents generally lack consistent, purposeful, or planned methods to identify whether a candidate possesses any of the 21 responsibilities, there are successful principals working in schools who were hired by successful and skilled superintendents. Nevertheless, for public schools to address the demands for improved student achievement, the identification of candidate qualities must be purposeful, consistent, and grounded in research.

Implications and a Call to Action

The call to action for superintendents is clear: They need to change the way they hire principals. Believing that the 21 responsibilities are important does not necessarily translate into selecting candidates who possess these abilities. Developing assessment tools and procedures to

measure the responsibilities in candidates is critical to improving student achievement.

For example, a set of interview questions could be constructed to specifically address each of the 21 responsibilities. For the responsibility of visibility, the interview questions might be similar to those in Table 5 in the Assessments row. Using the responsibility definition, indicators, and examples, the candidate's answers could be assessed to determine his or her abilities within this particular responsibility.

The superintendent could also use the 21 responsibilities when checking a candidate's references. Tailoring reference questions to address the characteristics determined as necessary would provide a triangulation of the candidate's qualities. A similar rubric could be used when reviewing an applicant's application materials, cover letter, or résumé. A writing test could be constructed for the candidate. Specific questions could be written that would assess a candidate's skills within the responsibilities determined to be most significant for the position.

If superintendents want to positively and purposefully affect student achievement in their schools, they need to systematically design processes to hire principals who possess the 21 responsibilities identified by Waters et al. (2004). Designing specific means to determine whether candidates possess the responsibilities is critical, but not difficult. There must be a plan to assess the 21 responsibilities, and superintendents must apply that plan consistently when hiring takes place. Just as teachers must assess their students with respect to their abilities within a given discipline, superintendents need to assess principal candidates using the 21 responsibilities. That process will require developing (a) interview questions, (b) specifically designed simulations, or (c) measurements designed to evaluate written materials to assess the characteristics of the candidates.

TABLE 5. Assessment of the 21 Responsibilities in a Principal Candidate

Tools for assessing candidate	Description/responsibility of visibility
Definition	The principal has positive, meaningful interactions with students and teachers.
Indicators	The principal makes regular and frequent visits to classrooms. The principal regularly interacts and meets with students. The principal is seen by teachers, parents, and students in a variety of activities and events.
Examples	The principal is a regular spectator at football games as well as music concerts. The principal visits with students and teachers at their lunch tables as well as the classrooms to see how things are going.
Assessments	Describe a typical day for you as a principal. You are looking at your personal calendar for the 4th week of school. What is listed for you to do? How would you get to know students in your school? Where do you eat lunch?

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