Rural Superintendents’ Perceptions of Principal Preparation

Martha Cray  
University of Northern Colorado

Elaine M. Millen  
Granite State College

As national and state expectations for school leadership competencies increase, new principals face an ever expanding role. Yet, scant attention is paid to the unique contextual needs of the varied school settings in which principals find themselves. This study surveyed rural superintendents of small districts (1 – 300 students) and mid-sized rural districts (301 – 600 students) to discover their perceptions of the development needs their new principals display. Seven areas of need were identified by the respondents, of which three pertained uniquely to the rural principalship. The three areas were: understanding the K – 12 school structure, preparing for the isolation of rural life, and knowing how to provide instructional leadership in an environment of scarce resources (human and material). The superintendents were also asked their perceptions of the effectiveness of various principal training program delivery models. The preferred delivery model was the in-district university cohort program. The delivery models superintendents rated least effective were the exclusively on-line training program and the state approved alternative certification program.

National concern over the decreasing availability of high quality principals has been framed by a broad spectrum of educational groups and advocates (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoepel, 2005; English, 2004; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Lasley, 2004). Issues range from a shrinking pool of applicants to questions regarding the preparedness of newly credentialed administrators to successfully transition to school principal role (Garrison-Wade, Goldring & Sims, 2005; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Sobel & Fulmer, 2007). Of particular note are the increasing expectations for the building principals to arrive on site with exemplary relationship building skills that allow them to bring together stakeholder groups with varied, and sometimes opposing, expectations (Goldring & Sims, 2005), proven pedagogical skills that allow them to be instructional leaders across classrooms and programs (Barnett, 2004), and broad understanding of curricula to assure equitable, appropriate access to learning for all students (Anderson & Louh, 2005).

There is no shortage of definitions of ideal leadership capacities. Over the past few decades, various descriptors of effective leadership in action have been put forth (Council for Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2008; Hall & Harris, 2008; Hambright & Franco, 2008) that have altered the core expectations for principals, from the role of site-manager to one of a visionary leader able to respond appropriately within a contextually defined environment (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003). As these role changes have emerged, there has been a tacit assumption that the rural administrative needs are defined by the same issues that administrators in suburban and urban districts face (Hess & Kelly, 2005). Principal preparation is a vital part of developing effective leaders. In this study rural superintendents were asked first to rate their perceived efficacy of various principal preparation programs available, and second, to identify areas in which new school administrators exhibit needs and face challenges.

The Status of Rural Education

The evolution of the policies, expectations and structures for rural school districts has followed national shifts in economic and social patterns. In 1895, the National Education Association (NEA) convened a committee to examine rural schooling (Steffes, 2008). The review panel, known as the Committee of Twelve, expressed concern over the state of rural schools and recommended policies of consolidation, bringing small rural schools into a more centralized structure with greater regulation and emphasis on professional supervision (Steffes, 2008). The report set the stage for policies and regulations to evolve framed by a uniform view of schooling, melding urban and rural schools as a single continuum representing quantifiable variations of need but yet having uniform expectations of what constitutes effective schooling. This policy promoting centralization, with an emphasis on supplying a work force to support the industrialization of the nation, had a direct effect on the rural schools that housed over half of the country’s children throughout the first third of the twentieth century (Steffes, 2008). As Steffes stated,

When scholars have addressed rural school reform, it has often been to demonstrate the ways in (sic) these professionals sought to impose their urban agenda on rural districts and effect a “covert transfer of power from the tribe to the professional” through reforms like school consolidation. (p. 182)

Over past seven decades, the struggle to establish balance among local, state and national interests on shaping education for the children in U.S. schools has continued.
While school reform has moved forward as an initiative, focused on policies and regulations that apply uniformly to urban, suburban and rural schools, 21st century educators and policy makers continue to wrestle with the idea and promise of rural education. At the millennium, over 70% of the nation’s school districts enrolled fewer than 2,500 students, and one third of these districts enrolled fewer than 600 students. These low population districts were collectively responsible for educating 20 percent of the U.S. student population (Arfstrom, 2002; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). Today’s rural families expect their children’s education to be equivalent to that of their urban and suburban counterparts (Arfstrom, 2002).

Another factor of importance in today’s rural communities is the emerging immigration pattern. As immigrant families arrive in rural settings, they offer a workforce to struggling rural economies. They also bring children who may be bilingual or monolingual in a language other than English to the rural schools (Donato, Tolbert, Nucci, & Kawan, 2007). While economic and resource disparities exist for children in rural schools, the established measures of success, such as achievement results, graduation rates, and student engagement in extracurricular activities, show that rural students are on a par with their non-rural peers (Arfstrom, 2002).

Expectations for Today’s Principals

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) convened a national task force in 2000 to raise public awareness about the issues facing educational leadership. The individuals invited to participate in the task force represented business, civic, education, and government groups. The discussion on school leadership in the 21st century arrived at two overarching principles. The first stated that principals must focus their leadership on learning above all else. Learning must clearly be the top priority in efforts to improve schools. The second stated that the position of principal, as currently defined, does not allow principals to focus on learning above all else due to the emphasis on building management and operation. The task force reported that the responsibilities of day-to-day operations do not allow principals to set the vision for learning and act as stewards for the vision through successful leadership practices (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000, p. 1). The Institute’s task force identified three essential capacities for principals (Usdan, et al., 2000). The first capacity centered on instructional leadership and accountability. The second addressed community leadership and advocacy and the third focused on visionary leadership and conviction that all children can learn. The IEL task force linked performance indicators to these general capacities, and specified the need for:

1. Instructional leadership that focuses on strengthening teaching and learning, professional development, data-driven decision making and accountability.

2. Community leadership manifested in a big-picture awareness of the school’s role in society; shared leadership among educators, community partners and residents; close relations with parents and others; and advocacy for school capacity building and resources.

3. Visionary leadership that demonstrates energy, commitment, entrepreneurial spirit, values and conviction that all children will learn at high levels, as well as inspiring others with this vision both inside and outside the school building. (Usdan, et al., 2000, p. 4)

No review of expectations for principals would be complete without examination of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, as approximately forty-three states have either adopted these standards outright or used them to frame requirements for principal licensure (CCSSO, 2008). These standards purport to outline what principals need to know and be able to do. They were designed to provide direction to principal training programs and state departments of education for improving the leadership at the building levels. The standards were “designed to serve as a broad set of national guidelines that states can use as a model for developing or updating their own standards” (CCSSO, 2008, p. 5).

The six standards define strong school leadership with regard to the capacity to:

1. Set a widely shared vision for learning.
2. Develop a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3. Ensure effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4. Collaborate with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5. Act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6. Understand, respond to and influence the political, social, legal and cultural contexts. (CCSSO, 2008, p.6)

The Stanford Educational Leadership Institute’s review of research identified yet another three essential components of the principalship:

1. Develop a deep understanding of how to support teachers.
2. Manage the curriculum in ways that promote student learning.
3. Develop the ability to transform schools into more effective organizations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students. (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005, p.5)

These leadership frameworks demonstrate the shift in expectations of the principal from a middle management function focused on implementation and oversight to a chief executive function responsible and accountable for the direction, effectiveness and results of the schools they serve (Wallace Foundation, 2009).
The Unique Configurations, Norms and Contexts of Small Rural Schools

While the challenges of geography, resources and economy of scale are clearly linked to small rural schools, there are assets associated with these settings as well. As Bauch (2001) stated, rural students face many challenges in gaining a sound education, but one of the advantages they have is that their schools are set in a community context that values a sense of place and offers a unique set of conditions for building social capital important for helping students succeed in school. (pp. 204–205)

Connections between rural schools and their communities tend to be closely knit and reflect the community patterns well. This means the schools mirror the economic and social stratifications found in the communities and are strongly influenced by these viewpoints (Bauch, 2001). Communication and exchange are more easily accomplished in these settings than in urban/suburban counterparts due to the central role the rural school is likely to play as a gathering place for the community, and to the ready, informal access to school staff (Cochran, et al., 2002). Rural inhabitants tend to view their communities as safe and share common values such as the importance of family, strong work ethic, and acceptable behavioral norms, which shape shared expectations for students and result in lower dropout rates and higher attendance rates than their urban counterparts (Bauch, 2001). There is another aspect to rural education that must be addressed by the school and community. Some families expect the schooling of their children to result in successful transition into the community as productive citizens, while other families expect the schooling to result in the development of capacities for their children to move into the world as autonomous, productive citizens outside the community (Bauch, 2002). This continuum calls for respectful, caring navigation by the educators in the community.

Staffing the rural school poses particular challenges for the leadership. The tendency to hire teachers from the community assures that the new hires are familiar with the setting, the isolation, the community norms and the lower salaries (Cochran et al., 2002). This practice can result in teachers who are younger, less experienced, and more likely to maintain the status quo (Bauch, 2001). Whether the staff is built around natives or newcomers, connections to the community are central to the success of the rural school. Bauch (2001) identified six types of family-school-community connections that build success in the rural school setting. The first type of connection is social capital, that is, the raising of children in the community values, social structures and relationships which in turn build trust, reciprocity, inter-generational connections and shared norms. The second connection, sense of place, creates rootedness, worldview, understanding of others, and appreciation for the resources of the community. The third connection is parent involvement which, in the rural setting, is linked to the greater social interactions central to the community. The fourth type of connection centers on the ties to the church. In rural environments, frequently there is only one church which serves as the other primary venue for the community’s interchange. The fifth type links the school-business-agency connections in the community, for example, the field-based experiences that bring the community into the school program and bring school children into the community enhance understanding and support. Finally, the last type of connection that builds school success is the use of the community as a curricular resource. Recognition and validation of community resources as important to the education of children create valuable relationships among the participants.

The review of literature makes clear the features that describe and characterize the rural school setting that have been important to the national dialogue on education for over a century. As the expectations for school leaders continue to develop, their impact on rural schools needs to be an integral part of the research, policymaking and decision making.

Methodology

This survey study was designed first to uncover rural superintendents’ perceptions of the efficacy of principal preparation delivery models available in Colorado to develop school leaders and second to explore areas in which superintendents perceived first year principals in rural school settings required further skills. The participants in this investigation were Colorado superintendents of rural districts. All superintendents in rural districts were contacted through a letter of introduction and invited to participate in the study. Two tiers of rural districts were identified. Tier one (small) included districts with fewer than 300 students enrolled. Of the 47 districts in this category, 20 superintendents elected to participate in the study. Tier two (mid-sized) included districts with 301 to 600 students enrolled. Of the 28 districts in this category, 16 superintendents participated in the study.

Coded surveys were mailed to each superintendent with a return envelope included. The surveys were coded to allow disaggregation by district size. An email with an electronic copy of the survey was sent to the non-respondent superintendents approximately three weeks after the initial mailing. Finally, a second survey was mailed to the remaining non-respondent superintendents approximately two weeks after the email request was sent. The response rate from rural superintendents from small districts was 43 percent (20 districts) and 57% (16 districts) for mid-sized districts. Overall the return rate for the rural-designated districts was 48 percent (36 districts).

The first part of the survey asked rural district superintendents to identify the types of principal preparation
delivery model available to their aspiring administrators they perceived to be most effective, least effective, and most common. The survey listed the seven delivery models available to principal candidates in Colorado. These were (a) district cohort program offered at a district site with an identified group of principal candidates from the participating district(s); (b) university cohort program offered to a designated group of principal candidates with classes held at the university site; (c) individual enrollment in program offered at the university campus; (d) individual enrollment in program offered at the university campus with some online components; (e) individual enrollment in an inclusively online program; (f) participation in the state-approved alternative certification program, and (g) district/university partnership program with a designated cohort of participants and shared teaching among district and university personnel. Responses were entered into a database to allow disaggregation and comparison of preference between the two tiers of rural districts.

The second part of the survey posed an open-ended question asking superintendents to list the skill deficits they observed in their newly-hired administrators as they stepped into the role of rural school principal. Data gathered from the open-ended question were entered in a database to allow disaggregation of the comments into the two tiers of rural districts. Coding the responses followed a grounded theory analysis procedure (Creswell, 1998). The grounded theory procedure provided the structure for developing categories of information using a constant comparative reference. The comparative connections were conducted until further investigation did not offer additional insight into the categories. The grounded theory analysis identified the respondents’ shared patterns of perception as well as any unique patterns of perceptions related to principal preparedness to lead rural schools. The first phase of analysis reviewed the deficits in principal readiness offered by the superintendents. This open coding process included a frequency count of the areas of concern. Phase two of the analysis centered on the selective coding of the listed deficits (Creswell, 2008). Selective coding allowed a cluster analysis that identified categories of skill deficit in first year rural principals as perceived by the superintendents who recommended their hire.

**Findings**

Rural superintendents in this study indicated their perceived efficacy of a variety of program options for principal licensure. Three small district superintendents and four mid-sized district superintendents elected not to respond to this task. Their comments specified that a lack of experience with the delivery models made rating the models inappropriate. The in-district cohort program was rated as the most effective delivery model by the highest number of both small (5) and mid-sized (7) rural district superintendents (see Table 1). The in-district cohort delivery model brings potential principal candidates together at a host district site to progress through the program as an intact group.

| Table 1 | Superintendents' Perceptions of Most Effective Principal Preparation Delivery Model |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Delivery Model | Small District | Mid-sized District |
| District cohort     | 5 | 7 |
| University/district partnership cohort | 4 | 2 |
| University cohort    | 2 | 3 |
| Individual on-campus (some online components) | 3 | 0 |
| Individual on-campus program | 1 | 0 |
| Individual online    | 1 | 0 |
| State approved alternative certification program | 1 | 0 |

The district/university partnership model was the top choice for four small and two mid-sized district leaders. The partnership model is collaboratively designed by the district and the university to answer the district’s needs for educational leadership and the university’s needs to meet program standards for licensure. It also offers the added benefit of a local meeting place to reduce travel for the program participants. As a component of the partnership, district personnel co-teach some of the courses offered. Both the in-district cohort delivery model and the partnership model promote the idea of developing leaders from within the districts. Three of the small district superintendents identified the individual enrollment in a university program model as the most effective delivery model for preparing their rural principals. This model represents the traditional approach to principal licensure. Individuals enroll in licensure programs and proceed through the program on an individual pace and sequence. The individual enrollment option allows participants to
design a schedule that suits the individual/family schedule, responsibilities and financial constraints.

When asked the inverse question, to identify the least effective models, the rural superintendents’ ratings showed some consistency when compared to their ratings of highly effective delivery models. One superintendent from each group elected not to respond to this query. As Table 2 illustrates, eight small and eight mid-sized rural district superintendents rated the on-line program the least effective delivery model. However, four small district superintendents rated the university/district partnership cohort as least effective (compared with four who rated it most effective). The mid-sized rural district superintendents showed notable agreement in their perceptions of least effective delivery models with the online program and state approved alternative certification models clearly identified as the least effective.

### Table 2

**Superintendents’ Perceptions of Least Effective Principal Preparation Delivery Model**

| Delivery Model                                         | Small District (n = 19) | Mid-sized District (n = 15) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Individual online                                      | 8                       | 8                           |
| University/district partnership cohort                  | 4                       | 2                           |
| State approved alternative certification program        | 3                       | 4                           |
| Individual on-campus program                           | 2                       | 1                           |
| University cohort                                      | 2                       | 0                           |
| District cohort                                         | 0                       | 0                           |
| Individual on-campus (some online components)          | 0                       | 0                           |

The third question asked the superintendents to identify the most common delivery models represented in the training of their new principals (Table 3). Three small rural district superintendents did not respond to this question. The most common delivery model for principal training in small rural districts was the university cohort program offered at the university followed by individual enrollment in a university program. The mid-sized rural superintendents listed the same two delivery models as the most common, but reversed the order. None of the participating superintendents had hired building administrators with licensure from the state-approved alternative certification program. None of the small rural districts had principals with certification from exclusively online programs, and none of the mid-sized districts had principals with certification from university/district partnership cohort programs. The data regarding the most common principal preparation programs raised some interesting patterns given the effectiveness ratings superintendents assigned to the various delivery models. For example, while only two small district superintendents rated the university cohort as most effective, eight of them said it was the most common method of delivery. Similarly, six mid-sized district superintendents reported the individual on-campus program was most common, but none of them viewed it as most effective.

### Table 3

**Most Common Principal Preparation Delivery Model Ratings**

| Delivery Model                                         | Small District (n = 17) | Mid-sized District (n = 16) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| University cohort                                      | 8                       | 4                           |
| Individual on-campus program                           | 4                       | 6                           |
| University/district partnership cohort                  | 3                       | 0                           |
| District cohort                                         | 1                       | 2                           |
| Individual on-campus (some online components)          | 1                       | 1                           |
| Individual online                                      | 0                       | 3                           |
| State approved alternative certification program        | 0                       | 0                           |
Rural Principals’ Areas of Difficulty

When asked to identify areas in which principals had difficulty over the course of their first year as rural school leaders, all superintendents offered thoughts on this question, and several of the mid-sized district superintendents noted more than one area of difficulty. These areas were clustered into seven categories (see Table 4). The categories were: (a) understanding the rural K – 12 school as a structure; (b) preparing for the isolation of rural life; (c) having high quality interpersonal skills; (d) knowing how to provide instructional leadership in an environment of scarce resources; (e) being aware of the practical experience inherent in the principalship; (f) managing the time demands made of the principal, and (g) having substantive understanding of the state standards and requirements.

Table 4

| Areas in which Superintendents Perceive First Year Rural Principals have most Difficulty |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Difficulty Areas                | Small District                  | Mid-sized District           |
|                                 | (n = 20)                        | (n = 16)                     |
| Isolation                       | 4                               | 2                            |
| Instructional Leadership        | 4                               | 2                            |
| Practical Experience            | 4                               | 4                            |
| Interpersonal Skills            | 3                               | 7                            |
| The Rural K-12 School Structure | 3                               | 1                            |
| State Standards and Requirements| 2                               | 2                            |
| Time Demands                    | 0                               | 4                            |

Note: Some superintendents identified more than one area.

Of these seven categories, three are features specific to the rural setting: Understanding the rural K – 12 school as a structure, preparing for the isolation of rural life, and knowing how to provide instructional leadership in an environment of scarce resources (both human and material). The most common rural-specific need expressed was first, a deeper understanding of the isolation inherent in the rural setting. The pattern of hiring local administrators is one way to mitigate this feature of the rural setting, but as the research suggests, this practice may make educational reform in the rural schools particularly difficult (Bauch, 2002; Cochran et al., 2001). The superintendents in both tiers of rural school districts noted the need for new administrators to have a greater awareness of the life of the rural administrator. Equally important was the requirement for principals to be instructional leaders. As one participant noted, superintendents in rural school districts wear too many hats to spend large amounts of time working on school principal training and curriculum development. Thus the demands of instructional leadership fall squarely on the shoulders of the new principal who may have limited experience on how to integrate instructional leadership with the management responsibilities inherent with school-based administration. In addition, the unique structural configuration of the K – 12 school posed particular challenges to new hires in the small sized rural school districts. The training and experience of most building administrators most often do not cover the full grade span of K – 12, and so many of the new principals in these schools are thrust into unfamiliar territory. One superintendent phrased this issue succinctly, noting “a K – 12 principal who has only been at the elementary level as a teacher is totally unqualified to lead at the secondary level.” A new principal arrives with limited practical experience in the role of building leader and this limitation is visible to veteran administrators. The remainder of the needs identified are common to most beginning principals no matter what the context (Cray & Weiler, 2009). Most do not understand the amount of time this job requires. The mid-sized rural district superintendents noted a need for their new administrators to arrive with higher levels of interpersonal skills. They observed that new administrators show inconsistency in communicating effectively with staff, need to be better equipped to deal with difficult stakeholders, and to be able to tell someone ‘no’ in the most effective way possible. Finally, developing the capacity to work within a school setting with national, state, and district requirements that place demands on the principal’s time and resources is a major adjustment for individuals new to the leadership role.

Discussion

The rural superintendents indicated a variety of perceptions of the efficacy of available principal preparation program delivery models. However, their experience of candidates arriving with licensure from some of the preferred delivery models was minimal or non-existent. These patterns suggest a presumptive bias by superintendents for or against delivery models that may be independent of experiential understanding of what the certification models offer.

There are some interesting issues in principal preparation delivery model choice as access to university-based cohorts or district-based cohorts is less likely in rural districts due to the geography, distance from the host institutions, population density, and insufficient numbers of participants to support off-site offerings from the institutions. There were, however, some opportunities
created by merging preparation programs across districts. This practice allowed teachers in rural districts to join colleagues from larger host or rural districts. In one district, the cohort was hosted by a rural district and included participants from districts of larger size in the area. In these cases, cohorts were created from a variety of districts but remained a stable group throughout the training program. These delivery options created opportunity for rural educators to share a common focus and create a rural network of colleagues interested in school leadership. The majority of superintendents viewed the district cohort structures as preferable delivery models.

On-line and state alternative certification options were generally perceived the least effective, although their accessibility was duly recognized by the rural superintendents. One of the issues with these delivery models relates to the scarcity of human and material resources and support in rural districts. Although on-line or alternative certification participants in larger districts are working independently, they have many more colleagues in their districts to answer questions or assist them in their efforts. In rural districts, the small size of the staffs and low numbers of administrators mean that individuals are more likely to be entirely on their own as they work toward their principal license. The isolation makes the internship experience, common to most preparation programs, particularly important. New principals are faced with the need to balance competing demands as they negotiate their new role. The internship and the inherent mentoring and supervision that occur help provide some insight and experience in juggling the multitude of daily tasks. An internship focused on instructional leadership, accountability, advocacy and visionary stewardship is essential to developing the leadership capacity needs for schools of the 21st century (Usdan, et al., 2000). However, study participants noted the depth of the internship experience varies widely. They observed that the mentor role in rural settings is both difficult to create and yet essential for effective transition to administrative positions. In addition, the current economic downturn and decreasing enrollments in schools lessen the likelihood of moving into the position of principal from the role of assistant principal. In the rural setting, it is also less likely that a peer is available to offer support to the new principal.

The superintendents of rural districts presented an array of needs displayed by beginning principals that makes a strong case for mentor/partnership relationships for new administrators that extend past the licensure phase into the transition phase of the first year or two of leadership at the building level. Districts with the K – 12 schools are particularly in need of support when a newly hired administrator has no teaching or administrative experience at one or even two of the levels included in the school. Unfamiliarity with elementary, middle, or secondary requirements, learner stages and developmental needs puts balanced attention to the particular requirements of elementary, middle and high school students and staff in jeopardy.

Conclusion

While the idea of a rural lifestyle has a place of note in our educational and cultural history, the reality of the geography, access to resources, and relationship-building in the rural community requires a commitment to outreach and time that is not anticipated by candidates lacking personal and/or professional experience in rural settings. Support structures that allow new administrators to access meaningful connections to peers in similar situations may be in place but loosely organized. Electronic networks, mentor programs and regional association activities provide opportunity for support but need to be purposefully organized to offer timely connections to individuals frequently overwhelmed by new demands in a new environment. The promise of mentor/partnership structures may offer an important support system to new principals but the nature of those structures must match the unique configurations faced by new rural administrators.

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