

The South Dakota Rural Principal: Characteristics and Leadership Style

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This paper describes the results of a survey of 108 rural South Dakota principals. Although these rural principals envision themselves as instructional leaders they indicate that a majority of their day is spent on general managerial duties and discipline. They also report that they are more concerned about task completion than individuals or school climate. It is concluded that while rural principals perceive themselves in one manner they quite often act in another manner. Several reasons may be advanced for this, but time and the multitude of administrative duties are two of the most likely.

The decade of the 1980's has challenged the educational institutions of this country as they have attempted to respond to the extensive criticisms and suggestions from a plethora of reports. No school, large or small, rural or urban escaped the impact of these reports. Schools, today, continue to wrestle with the meaning of the data generated by the national reports and the effective school movement. One item that stands out in all the data is that building leadership is a vital component of an effective school where students and teachers are successful in the educational process. Lipham (1) noted that the principal "is crucial to the school's success."

Although this holds true for all schools, the focus of most of the research has been on the urban principal and the urban school. Rural school leadership and programs are too often ignored in the studies. There are several plausible reasons for this; they relate to both accessibility and the personal preferences of researchers. Overlooking the rural school can lead to the erroneous assumption that all school leaders behave in the same manner regarding the operation of their schools.

Certainly there are many similarities, yet the differences that exist are unique and need to be recognized. Size, location, district goals, socio-economic composition, and community expectations are forces which deserve consideration. Each region of the country has its own "uniqueness" which also must be recognized when examining schools.

METHODOLOGY

In light of the continued, intense focus on the Principal as the "instructional leader" and the "controller" (shaper) of school climate, a decision was made to survey small, rural school secondary principals in South Dakota. Schools selected for survey purposes were those with high school populations of fewer than 150 students. The location of

the schools was not viewed as critical since South Dakota is primarily rural. One hundred and eighteen (118) questionnaires were mailed to principals throughout the state. One hundred and eight (92%) of the questionnaires were returned.

The survey consisted of two separate instruments. One component was a general, self reporting questionnaire of 25 items relating to the principalship in the school and related duties and activities. The second instrument was a leadership style questionnaire, consisting of ten questions with three parts to each question. The respondent was asked to rank the components in each question with a 3 being most likely. The various responses were then equated to leadership decisions representing task, climate, or individual concern.

RESULTS-FINDINGS

The Principals

The results of the self reported questionnaire revealed the following about the 108 responding small school principals:

- 1) Ninety-six percent were male and only 4% were female.
- 2) The principal has been a classroom teacher for an average of 7.5 years before becoming an administrator.
- 3) The principal has been an administrator for an average of 10.4 years.
- 4) Eighty percent indicate they would go into administration again if given the choice while 20% indicate they would instead choose to remain in the classroom or would elect to pursue a totally different profession.
- 5) The average principal had been in the current school for approximately 9.6 years.

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The Principalship

The average principal reported arriving at school 47 minutes before his/her staff and remaining approximately 58 minutes after the school day. Additionally, 75% of those responding taught periodically in a certified area while 32% teach one or two courses (and even more for some) on a regular daily basis. The teaching principal is not an uncommon phenomenon in rural South Dakota. Additionally, he/she reports attending an average of 3 or 4 extra-curricular activities per week while 14% of the respondents indicated they attended 5 or more activities per week.

Most indicated attempts to maintain high profiles in their schools by being visible in the hallways, classrooms, and faculty lounges throughout the day. The majority of the principals (76%) reported holding monthly faculty meetings while 20% reported holding weekly meetings. The remainder held meetings only when they deemed it necessary. Principals indicated that all faculty meetings were primarily designed to disseminate information from the Superintendent or the local Board of Education. Fully 94% reported that they actively attempt to keep their staff informed of all major decisions. Almost all (99%) reported that students and teachers felt free to discuss matters of importance with them at any time. Most principals (88%) stated that they attempt to praise and compliment their teachers on a regular basis, although many indicated their teachers need more praise than they ever receive.

In the area of staff development, 95% of the principals indicated they normally attend in-service, while 75% reported that they actively assist in conducting these sessions. Regular attendance at professional conferences within the state of South Dakota was reported by 51% of the principals. However, only 12% indicated having attended a national conference. If there is a reason for this failure to attend national conferences, it would probably relate to the geographic location of the state and schools, cost, and the assigned teaching duties of many principals. The South Dakota rural principal reported having read an average of three of the national reports on education.

When asked to identify his/her primary job as a principal, 64% indicated their first priority was to act as an instructional leader. The fulfillment of this role, however, is not evidenced upon examination of the reported data. Principals surveyed were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent on a daily basis in four areas. The averaged responses were as follows:

- 14% on disciplining students,
- 51.2% on general managerial duties,
- 19.5% on working directly with teachers, and
- 7.2% on meeting with parents.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be an instructional leader when the average day is spent in the manner indicated. These findings indicate a contradiction between the perceived role of the rural South Dakota principal and the actual role. The contradiction becomes even

more apparent when fully 32% report teaching on a daily basis. Reasons for this appear elusive but most likely result from conflicting demands regarding traditional, realistic, and idealistic behaviors.

The typical rural administrator was born or reared more than 100 miles from the area within which he/she now works. This contradicts the notion that many rural schools often seek their own graduates. The majority of the respondents received their administrative training at either South Dakota State University (36%) or Northern State (35%).

Leadership

Responses to the second instrument, consisting of leadership questions, provided further insight into the role of the South Dakota rural principal. The primary question that was to be answered by this questionnaire was: What is the leadership approach that best characterizes the rural South Dakota secondary principal?

In scoring the questionnaire, four instruments were not usable because the respondent chose not to answer a question or answered a question only partially. Thus, the return rate was 88% for the leadership style questionnaire versus 92% for the first instrument.

The questionnaire consisted of ten statements regarding situations with three possible attitudes or actions that could be taken. Respondents were asked to place a "3" by their preferred attitude or action, a "2" by their second choice, and a "1" by the action they would least likely take. For instance, a statement such as "A primary objective of a leader is" would be followed by three choices which the respondent would then rank order. Each choice correlated to one of the three individual leadership orientations: (a) task, (b) climate, or (c) concern for the individual. Respondents' rankings for each choice within the ten situations were averaged to obtain a mean response. Means of respondents' rankings related to each of the leadership orientations were then totaled. Totals could range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 30. Higher totals indicated a tendency toward that particular leadership style.

Although, overall, one could state that the leadership approach of the South Dakota rural principal was varied, it is important to note that, based on the score distribution, the South Dakota rural principal more likely makes decisions that are task oriented. Task orientation, with a mean composite score of 21.94, was more often selected than individual concerns (19.70) or climate (18.22). This task commitment suggests that the principals believe that, although there should be some freedom of expression, the focus should remain on the task and that subordinates should be helped to understand the task.

The task orientation conclusion conflicts with principals' views of being instructional leaders and maintaining open doors. It does, however, support the fact that principals spend a great amount of their time on general managerial duties and the daily functioning of the school. It would be appropriate to state that rural South Dakota secondary school administrators are least likely to adopt

a leadership decision-making approach which stresses primarily a climate or human relations (individual) approach. This does not mean that one can automatically assume that the rural South Dakota principal is autocratic in nature. However, the tendency to first accomplish a task and to do a job is clearly identified here as a highest priority.

If there is conflict here, it clearly lies in the perceptions of the principals. They appear to perceive themselves on one hand as having instructional leadership responsibilities, but when the necessity of completing a job or task arises, their actual responses are much more direct and task (autocratic) oriented.

CONCLUSIONS

South Dakota rural secondary principals appear to be committed individuals who give of their time through daily activities, teaching, and maintenance of the school. They are individuals who, for the most part, enjoy the challenges of the job. The average tenure indicates that principals view the district they live in as their home; they do not appear transitory in nature. They actively work at improving themselves, but due to the breadth of their duties are not able to attend national conferences

or many state conferences. They perceive that they are instructional leaders but also admit that general managerial tasks consume a great portion of their time.

Their leadership approach is varied but essentially becomes task oriented when it is necessary to get the job done. They ideally would like to take other approaches but often appear to get bogged down in daily tasks of teaching, managing, attending events, and disciplining. Time appears their most precious commodity as well as their greatest adversary. In the end, the need to maintain the organization often wins out over other considerations. They, perhaps more than the urban principal, are often overwhelmed by a multitude of tasks.

This conclusion is not meant to imply value or to designate what is good or bad but instead to inform and report. It is important that similar studies be conducted of other rural principals in other rural states. Further research is necessary and when complete should provide recognition of any similarities or dissimilarities that may exist.

REFERENCES

1. Lipham, J.A. *Effective principal, effective school*. Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1978.