

The Great Plains Rural Secondary Principal: Aspirations and Reality

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This study of rural schools in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas focused on self reported characteristics of secondary school principals including their leadership styles. A total of 592 surveys were mailed to the identified population and returned by 462. It was found that while Great Plains rural principals envision themselves as instructional leaders, they spend a majority of the day in general management while teaching for an average of 35.6% of the day. They also are concerned, as leaders, more often about task completion than about school climate or individual needs. No substantial differences between male and female rural principals, either experienced or inexperienced, were found in general activities or leadership style. It is concluded that the Great Plains rural principals perceive themselves in one manner but often act in another manner. Time pressures, teaching assignments, and a multitude of administrative duties probably explain this schism.

The decade of the 1980's, with its emphasis on educational reform and the development of effective schools, has seen emerge the view that the building principal is a vital component in systematic educational improvement. Research has continued to provide evidence that building level leadership is a key to achieving effective outcomes in schools [1, 4, 17]. Ellis [5] and Lipham [12] noted that schools are rarely effective unless the principal is an instructional leader. Instructional leadership has been best defined as "the principal's role in providing direction, resources, and support to teachers and students for the improvement of teaching and learning in the school" [10]. The U.S. Department of Education booklet, *Principal Selection Guide*, [20], indicated that "effective school leaders have broad visions that are clear, active, ambitious, and performance-oriented" (p. 5). Austin and Garber [2] identified instructional leadership, an openness to change, and well established goals in planning and decision making as crucial components for administrative success. While it is clear that the debate may continue as to the types of behaviors exhibited by effective leaders, there is virtually no doubt that the principal is an important, critical figure in the creation and maintenance of an effective school [15, 12].

The evidence for how effective leaders partition and utilize their time inconclusive, although some research has suggested that a great deal of time is allocated by the most effective principals to clarifying educational goals with staff, students, parents and community members [11, 18, 9]. This research has also indicated that truly effective principals focused extensively on facilitating communication; developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; motivating others within the educational community; and providing knowledge, expertise, and

guidance. Keefe [9] discussed the need for building administrators to possess clear, organized plans for implementing instructional leadership. He indicated that effective administrators were good organizers, planners, and collaborators.

Glatthorn and Newburg [6] addressed the issue of the difficulties that are encountered when one attempts to do everything effective instructional leaders must do while confronted with a multitude of other time consuming demands. They reported that effective leaders share leadership with others and delegate as necessary. These effective leaders were identified as consensus seekers in their desire to achieve educational goals. A research summary by the Northwest Regional Laboratory [14] argued that effective principals who are concerned about the curriculum and student progress strive to establish systems that consistently improve instructional effectiveness. Conversely, Leithwood and Montgomery [11] indicated that less effective administrators were often those who envisioned the school and its goals in somewhat vague terms. These principals often saw their primary goal as maintenance of the *status quo*. Rutherford [16] also found that less effective administrators had no vision for their schools, but instead focused on maintaining tranquility.

While research continually seeks to identify critical administrative attributes and actions which positively impact excellence and effectiveness of schools, the overall attention has been to larger, urban systems [4, 1, 17]. There are several possibilities for this, including accessibility of sites and personal preferences of researchers. Few studies are found that specifically address small rural school principals and the attributes, behaviors, and leadership styles that contribute to or hamper school

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effectiveness. Buttram and Carlson [3] stated that urban and rural schools often paralleled each other except for minor cultural or environmental differences. Turzman [19], in a study of effective rural schools, found that strong instructional leadership was a key to the development of effective rural schools. Certainly, although there are often extensive contextual differences between urban and rural schools, it would behoove the rural administrator to utilize, with some necessary environmental modifications, the research on effective leadership and schools.

It is quite obvious that there is continued emphasis on principals' behaviors which focus on excellence and equity for all as central to the creation of effective schools. It is also clear that a majority of the research has had the urban school as its focal point. However, rural schools and rural America are a reality, and the need to expand the knowledge base on rural school leadership and to examine the manner in which rural schools function has been too long neglected.

METHODOLOGY

A survey of day-to-day activities and a leadership style questionnaire were mailed to all rural secondary school principals in the Great Plains states of South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska. Principals selected were those from high schools with fewer than 150 students. Location of schools in terms of size of community or distance to "urban" centers was not considered critical since the Great Plains states are primarily rural. Five hundred ninety-two questionnaires were mailed and 462 returned (78%) (see Table 1). The principals' names, school size, and location were obtained from individual state department documents or directories.

The survey consisted of two separate instruments. One instrument was a descriptive, self-report questionnaire consisting of 25 general questions relating to various characteristics of the individual respondents as well as various administrative duties and activities. The return rate for this first instrument was 78%.

The second component of the survey was a leadership style questionnaire, consisting of ten scenarios or questions with three possible responses to each. The principals were asked to place a "3" by their preferred action or attitude, a "2" their second choice, and a "1" by the

action they would least likely select. For instance, a statement such as "A primary objective of a leader is" would then be followed by three possibilities that the respondent would rank order. Each possible choice correlated to one of three identified leadership style orientations: (a) task, (b) climate, or (c) concern for the individual. Respondent's rankings for each alternative selected for the ten situations were averaged to obtain mean responses. Means of the principals' rankings related to each of the three leadership orientations were then totaled. Totals could range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 30. The higher the total in each leadership orientation, the greater the tendency toward that particular leadership style. The return rate for this leadership style questionnaire was 69.7%.

The data from the first questionnaire was reviewed for overall demographics as well as for gender differences. The leadership style data was examined for overall results as well as for male-female leadership differences. In addition, leadership styles of administrators with five or fewer years of experience were compared with leadership styles of administrators with more than fifteen years of experience.

RESULTS

The Great Plains Rural Secondary Principal

The results of the self-report questionnaire suggested the following about the 462 small school principals responding:

1. Ninety-seven percent were male and 3% female.
2. The typical principal had been a classroom teacher for 7.95 years before becoming an administrator.
3. The Great Plains rural principal has been an administrator for an average of 10.8 years.
4. Eighty-seven percent indicated they would go into administration again if given the choice, while 13% stated they would remain in the classroom or would elect to pursue a different profession.
5. The average principal has been in the current school in some capacity for approximately 9.2 years.

TABLE 1
Great Plains Rural Principal Survey Return Rate

	Surveys Mailed	Surveys Returned	Percentage	Male Returns (n =)	Percentage	Female Returns (n =)	Percentage
North Dakota	184	125	67.9%	118	94.4%	7	5.6%
South Dakota	118	108	91.5%	105	97.2%	3	2.8%
Nebraska	150	123	82.0%	121	98.4%	2	1.6%
Kansas	140	106	75.7%	105	99.5%	1	.5%
Overall	592	462	78.5	449	97.2%	13	2.8%

Typical principals also reported that they arrived at school approximately 52 minutes before the day began and remained 64 minutes after the school day was over. Because of the nature of tasks in the small school, 75% of those responding indicated that they taught periodically in their teaching area while 48% were teaching-principals and were contractually assigned both teaching and administrative duties. Those assigned both duties averaged teaching 35.6% of the day. In addition to teaching and daily administrative duties, the average principal reported attending 3 or 4 extracurricular events per week while 18% of the respondents indicated they attended 5 or more activities per week.

Typical rural principals indicated that they attempted to maintain high profiles in classrooms, hallways, and faculty lounges throughout the day. Although 99.5% indicated a preference for high visibility, only 9% reported being in classrooms on a daily basis. Sixty-three percent indicated they were in the classrooms once a month or less. In order to maintain effective lines of communication, 46% of the principals reported holding monthly faculty meetings while 31% held bi-weekly or weekly meetings. The remainder of the respondents indicated faculty meetings were scheduled whenever they believed they were needed. Ninety-three percent indicated they made a conscious attempt to keep teachers informed about Board of Education or Superintendent decisions. Almost all (99%) reported that students and teachers felt free to discuss matters of importance with them at any time. Although most indicated that this "open" relationship existed within the school, only 89% reported that they praised teachers on a regular basis for good work. A common statement from principals was that providing recognition for quality instruction was an area that they needed to consciously address.

In the area of staff development, 93% of the rural principals indicated they normally attended in-service activities, while 74.8% reported they actively assisted in conducting staff development sessions. Regular attendance at state administrative conferences was reported by the majority, however only 24% of the responding principals had ever attended a national convention. The 109 principals who had attended national conferences reported attending an average of 3.13 conventions. Ninety-seven percent of the principals stated that they had read one or more of the national reports on the status of education. The average was 3.4 for those who provided an estimate of the number of such reports read. Although this average may seem low when one considers the number of reports published, what is even more remarkable is that 3% of the respondents indicated they had read none of reports issued during the past decade.

When asked to identify their primary responsibilities, 58% stated that their first priority was to be an instructional leader. Discipline (20%) and management (19%) were a distant second and third. However, fulfillment of the instructional leadership role is not evidenced upon further examination of the data. When asked to estimate the percentage of time spent on a daily basis in four areas, the averaged responses were as follows:

- 48.3% on general managerial duties
- 11.5% on working directly with teachers
- 22.3% on disciplining students, and
- 6.8% on meeting with parents.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be an instructional leader when a typical day is spent as indicated. It is especially difficult for rural principals to be instructional leaders when 48% of them teach and the average teaching load is 35.6% of the school day. These findings identify an important contradiction between the perceived role of rural principals and the actual roles. The most likely explanation for this contradiction centers upon a conflict between what should be one's role in an idealistic sense, and what is reality, given the restraints of time and daily organizational expectations. Rural principals appear to have a goal of functioning in what they know is the best or preferred mode of operation. However, that goal is too often obviated by the daily intrusion of inescapable reality.

Only 16.9% of these principals reported being born or reared in the same area they were serving as administrators. Eighty-three percent were born and reared 100 miles or more from their current school. Certainly distance, size, and the isolation of the rural school in the Great Plains states has something to do with this. Optimistically, this suggests that districts are hiring the best administrator possible and looking beyond the local candidate pool.

Gender Differences

In addition to reviewing the collective data, differences between male and female principals were examined. Although the number of female administrators responding was small ($N = 13$), it was still deemed to be an important group. Few differences between male and female administrators were found.

1. Male principals had an average of 10.9 years of administrative experience compared to 8.8 years for females.
2. Women principals had served an average of 11.2 years in their current district while men had served an average of 9.1 years.
3. Forty-six percent of the female administrators held weekly faculty meetings while only 18% of the males did so.
4. Only one female administrator had attended a national convention compared to 108 men.
5. All of the women reported that they would go into administration again while only 87% of the men so reported.

Perhaps the most significant difference between male and female principals concerned the manner in which the average school day was spent. Seventy-seven percent of the females indicated their primary job was as an instructional leader but only 58% of the men held this view. However, both groups indicated that the majority of their daily routine was consumed by general managerial duties. Contact with teachers and student discipline were ranked second and third, respectively, in terms of

the amount of time each group allocated to these activities. Considerably less time was devoted to these than to general management. Upon further examination of how the typical day was spent, it was found that 80% of the women were contractually assigned both teaching and administrative duties with an average of 48% of the day involved in instruction. Only 47% of the male rural principals were assigned both administrative and teaching duties with the men teaching an average of 35% of the day. It is clear that the concept of instructional leadership is significantly impacted when one teaches between 1/3 and 1/2 of the school day; and, that the female rural principal, because of a heavier teaching load, would be substantially impaired in providing effective instructional leadership when compared to her male counterpart.

Leadership

Responses to the second instrument, consisting of leadership questions and scenarios, provided further insight into the work environment of these principals. The central questions were: What leadership approach best characterizes these secondary school principals? Were female respondents' leadership styles significantly different from those of their male counterparts? Were principals with five or fewer years of administrative experience different in leadership style than those with fifteen or more years of experience?

Although the principals show some variation in leadership style, it is clear that the Great Plains rural administrators most often make decisions that are task oriented. Task orientation, ($\bar{X} = 22.5$) was the leadership orientation most often selected. Individual concerns ($\bar{X} = 19.47$) or climate ($\bar{X} = 18.03$) were less often identified as preferred styles. When male and female principals were compared, it was found that while both were primarily task oriented, the females task composite score of 24 was higher than that of the male's 22.4. Concerns for the individual was ranked second by both groups. The female principals' composite was 19.75 while the males' was 19.47. Climate concerns were lower for the female administrators ($\bar{X} = 16.25$) than for males ($\bar{X} = 18.1$). The differences were not significant between the sexes ($p \leq .05$) on any of the three leadership orientations.

There was no differences found in leadership orientation between administrators with fewer than 5 and more than 15 years of experience (see Table 2). The similarity of these scores suggests that rural principals remain remarkably constant and consistent throughout their careers in leadership style. An unmistakable commitment to task orientation appears to exist in both male and female rural principals, experienced or not.

This task orientation of the Great Plains rural principals conflict with their views of being instructional leaders and maintaining open doors. It does support the fact that the principals allotted a large portion of their time to general management and daily functioning of their schools. The data indicates that the Great Plains principal, male or female, experienced or inexperienced, is least likely to adopt a leadership style which stresses either a

TABLE 2
A Comparison of Leadership Style of Administrators

	5 years or less administrative experience Overall (n = 131)	15 years or more administrative experience Overall (n = 127)
Task	22.6	22.4
Individual	19.4	19.5
Climate	18.0	18.1

human relations (individual) or climate approach. Certainly, the rural principal's propensity and highest priority is to accomplish day-to-day tasks.

If there is conflict here, it obviously lies in the self-perceptions of these principals. They appear to perceive themselves as instructional leaders, but the simple truth is that, when necessary, a more direct and task (autocratic) oriented response becomes their mode of operation.

CONCLUSIONS

Great Plains rural principals appear to be committed individuals who are vigorously involved in a variety of daily educational activities, teaching, and maintenance of schools. They are, for the most part, content in their administrative role and enjoy the challenges of the job. Their average tenure indicates they are not transients and that they view local school districts as their homes. They generally seek to improve themselves through local and state staff development activities. However, their involvement in professional organizations at the national level is minimal. Certainly economics, geographic location, and the broad scope of their contractual duties are logical restraints but not necessarily the only reasons for their limited participation at the national level.

They perceive themselves as instructional leaders but spend the greatest portion of their day focusing on general managerial duties. They indicate they are highly visible in their school and attend many extracurricular activities yet they are rarely in teachers' classrooms. Their leadership is varied, but when it is necessary to get the job accomplished, they tend to become fundamentally task oriented. Concern for climate and individual needs become lost in the daily tasks of teaching, managing, disciplining, and attending school related activities. This task oriented leadership style is a constant whether they are new administrators or experienced veterans.

One cannot label Great Plains rural principals as good or bad, effective or ineffective. They may idealistically prefer to utilize other leadership approaches but the need to address the multitude of daily tasks often makes time their most precious resource as well as their most baneful enemy. Sadly, maintenance of the organizational structure often takes precedence over all other concerns.

If the perception of instructional leadership is ever to become reality, rural principals must be provided opportunities to become effective leaders. Communities and local Boards of Education must realize that when their administrators teach a third of the day and are not supported in their efforts to grow professionally their schools may never reach their potential. Rural administrators also must learn to delegate some of the daily management to staff. Empowerment of others is a potent and dynamic leadership approach. Building level leadership is the key to effectiveness and rural principals must be provided opportunity and assistance in becoming discernable instructional leaders.

Finally, the rural school is here to stay. Rural schools and their constituents must stop believing the myth that small means schools cannot be excellent [7, 13]. Educators in rural schools, instead of feeling handicapped, should explore the opportunities that ruralness provides. These opportunities can range from utilizing smaller cohesive staffs to flexibility in scheduling to the use of teaming and cooperative learning activities. Rural administrators, teachers, and students are part of the rural reality that needs to be further explored and evaluated in the search for effective educational systems.

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