

Principal Succession Planning: Findings from a Qualitative Study

by

Sara LeRoy

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Fatima Terrazas Arellanes, Chair

Dr. Krista Parent, Core Member

Dr. David Liebowitz, Institutional Representative

University of Oregon

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Sara LeRoy

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Title: Principal Succession Planning: Findings from a Qualitative Study

This was a case study of the principal succession planning practices of a large school district in Oregon. For the study, the researcher interviewed nine principals and nine central office administrators and surveyed 17, K-12 assistant principals within the studied school district. The findings from this study reveal many strengths and weaknesses within the studied district's current principal succession planning practices and is followed by considerations for this school district that might be applied to other school districts. The considerations include creating clarity around the desired qualities and skills of an effective principal, creating more teacher leader pathways to principalships, aligning current practices for the district's aspiring administrators to their partner university's administrator licensure program, and intentionally supporting assistant principals and principals through mentoring and focused professional development.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Building, hiring, and retaining effective principals is critical to students, staff, and school districts, and a “viable succession plan must be in place to ensure continued success in the school” (Ritchie, 2020, p. 33). The approach of identifying and retaining principals, also known as principal succession, is used in this study to identify the effective principal succession planning practices within a school district in the Northwest. Principal succession planning practices are the practices a school district uses to identify, hire, place, and support their principals. The study is important to the field because school districts can learn from their central office administrators, current principals, and assistant principals about how they can build a principal pipeline (staff members who are not currently principals but possess the responsibilities of effective principals), hire, and retain effective principals. This insight along with the research around principal succession will lead to effective principal succession planning within school districts.

Serving as a teacher, teacher leader, high school assistant principal, high school principal, and most recently as an elementary level director at one of the largest school districts in Oregon, I have had the opportunity to see the impact of effective and ineffective school principals. Measuring an effective versus an ineffective principal is nuanced and will be explored in this study. But as a general point of reference, an effective principal is one who at least demonstrates proficiency on the measured principal leadership standards on their evaluation. These standards, identified by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), lead principals to set a vision for their school, bring staff together behind that vision, and make gains on academic achievement measures such as test scores and graduation rates. I have seen how

effective principals successfully transition into buildings and lead their schools to have positive school cultures and high student achievement. I have also seen how the impact of less effective principals hinders our district's ability to improve student achievement like we have set out to do and leads to staff turnover. My district and likely many others can do better in building a principal pipeline, hiring, and supporting principals to ensure that effective principals are leading our schools. This critical work will facilitate the districts' ability to reach their strategic planning goals that center around improving student achievement.

Principal succession planning is the approach to identifying, hiring, and retaining principals, "including preparation, recruitment, selection, onboarding, induction, development, and retention" (Cieminski, 2018, p.21). Moreover, Rothwell (2010) who studied succession planning in large organizations, asserts that succession planning is critical to strategic planning. Without leaders who are prepared to lead and align their work to the goals of the organization, the success of the organization's strategic plan is in jeopardy. As small, medium, or large organizations, Rothwell's study of leader succession planning can be applied to school districts. School districts vary in size, but districts of all sizes would likely benefit from systemizing how they develop, assign, and support their principals. School districts, like most organizations, rely on district office administrators and school principals to ensure that strategic plans are successfully implemented, and organizational goals are met. The leaders who are closest to the critical work with the students are school principals, and district strategic plans are likely centered around the achievement of those students. For this and many other reasons, school principals are critical for district success; therefore, thoughtful principal succession planning is important for school districts.

John Hattie in his much-shared work *Visible Learning* (2008) notes that principals are second to teachers as the most important staff in a school to influence student achievement. Similarly, Grissom et al. (2021) establish in their research that an effective principal is almost as impactful to student achievement as an effective teacher. Additionally, Ertuek (2021) found that principals who emotionally, instructionally, and managerially supported their teachers had teachers with greater job satisfaction than principals who were not supportive. Keeping teachers happy and engaged in the critical work they do with students, as the most impactful staff on student achievement, is an essential function of a principal. Furthermore, Clayton and LaBatt (2019) found that leaders who created equitable and high achievement outcomes for students also exhibited shared leadership with their staff and students. This demonstrates that principals who positively impact student achievement create a culture of ownership and shared leadership in the work.

Similarly, in our ever changing and diverse world of public schools, Alanoglu and Karabatak (2021) assert that schools need to transform or become learning organizations, and to do that they need leaders who get staff behind a shared vision, support them, and lead staff through learning and improving their practices for students. Fullan (2002) describes this work as being led by Cultural Change Principals (CCPs). These are principals that are more than instructional leaders. They know how to implement change and have the soft skills to build relationships with staff, which develops shared leadership and staff ownership of the change initiative to improve student achievement. Moreover, Fullan (2002) asserts that school districts will not see improvement until all their principals are CCPs because “sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward” (p. 4). Having all principals within a district that have the skills to lead change and build a positive culture will lead to

improved student achievement for students in the district not just particular schools. This is in alignment to Rothwell's assertion that an organization's strategic planning will not succeed without effective leaders throughout the organization. Thus, all schools within a school district need effective principals to ensure that students achieve at high levels, staff have the support to do their critical work, and the district meets its strategic planning goals.

Because principals are critical to student achievement within their buildings and for the district, school districts need to have effective practices in place to ensure a strong leader is leading every school within their district successfully. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) states the following regarding school principal jobs:

Despite limited employment growth, about 20,200 openings for elementary, middle, and high school principals are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Most of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire. ("Job Outlook" section)

Specific to Oregon, the State of Oregon Employment Department (2023) shares that in 2021 there were 3,286 employed school principals and 246 vacancies, noting that the demand for school administrators will continue to grow through 2031. Moreover, according to a July 2023 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, throughout the United States, 11% of principals left in the 2021-22 school year, which was higher than in 2016-17, when 10% of all public school principals had left the profession. In the state of Oregon and throughout the nation, school districts need to think critically about how they are recruiting and/or developing future principals, how they are hiring them, and then supporting them in their roles because these critical vacancies are essential to fill with qualified candidates and retain them for student and district success.

Bryant et al. (2017) point to the principal vacancy rate in the United States as a principal short fall. They assert that there is a principal shortage in the United States for many reasons. Some of the reasons are that school districts do not have candidates with the right skills, and teachers lack motivation to become administrators (Bryant et al., 2017). This lack of candidates is often described as a principal pipeline problem. A principal pipeline describes a situation within a school district where it is possible to identify and support staff who are ready and willing to become the next principals in their school buildings (Bryant et al., 2017). The principal pipeline problem, however, is just the beginning of the principal succession problem that needs to be addressed in school districts.

Another problem districts need to address in their principal succession planning is hiring due to turnover in the position, which should be mitigated if staff are nurtured in that pipeline and have the motivation to apply for principal positions. Hiring is a critical practice, and school districts need to have a strong pipeline as well as a process for hiring principals internally and externally.

After building a strong principal pipeline and implementing effective hiring practices, the next issue that districts need to address is principal retention. How districts hire and support principals is critical to keeping leaders at the helm in school buildings. For example, Oregon Public Broadcasting featured a story regarding the impact of principal turnover in Portland Public Schools on June 3, 2021. This story cited the parent and teacher concern on the impact of principal turnover. The parents at one elementary school came together to advocate for better wages and more support for principals, suggesting that the staff and parents know how important a strong and reliable principal is for students and staff.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review was conducted by searching for peer reviewed journal articles within electronic databases. To conduct the search, the key search term principal with the Boolean operator “and” to expand and limit the search was used. Those terms paired with principal were success, transitioning, support, succession, and new. The university library’s electronic databases and Google Scholar were used to find relevant research. As articles were reviewed, other articles based on the citations within the articles were tracked. This allowed for a deeper exploration of the topic of study, which resulted in the location of relevant articles as described in the following paragraphs.

#### **Value of Principal Succession Planning**

Parfitt (2017) used a mixed-method study in four Florida school districts to learn about perceptions of principal succession planning. For his study, he received surveys from 99 participants and then interviewed 11 individuals. Most of the participants were supervisors of principals, principals, assistant principals, and leadership candidates. A few participants were identified as “other.” Parfitt (2017) looked at the importance of appropriate fit of principals to assigned schools and found that smaller districts felt like they had a healthy culture for administrators where they were all known, and therefore the smaller districts did not see the importance of considering school culture and matching the principal to that culture; whereas, the bigger districts noted that the lack of matching principals to school culture was not considered and resulted in problems.

Parfitt (2017) found that regarding principal support, all participants agreed that informal mentoring occurred more than formal mentoring, and the level of trust and convenience

were important aspects to the fruition of the mentoring. Parfitt (2017) also found that participants found challenges in getting the support they needed. They found that principals needed to be strong self-advocates and good at networking to get the support needed and that the support each principal needed varied due to the complexity of the job and the uniqueness of each school. Also, of note from Parfitt's study (2017), is that assistant principals felt like their input into the professional development they needed was not important to those making the decisions (district office, senior management). It is also important to point out from this study that most participants from larger districts spoke to getting principal jobs as political and not all candidates as being seen for all the attributes they could bring to the job. Parfitt's (2017) study highlights the need to consider school culture and candidate input when placing a principal into a position, listening to educators in our principal pipeline and addressing their needs to develop their capacity to become principals, and to create mentoring programs that are more systemic while building on trusting and convenient relationships.

Like Parfitt's study, Zepeda et al. (2011) conducted a multiple-case study of four Georgia school districts by engaging participants in semi-structured interviews to learn about the district perceptions of principal succession planning. What this study found was that large urban districts had a much greater sense of urgency than smaller rural districts did for succession planning and management of that plan. Moreover, they found that districts that partnered with universities for principal preparation programs also found that they needed additional training beyond the principal preparation program in leadership, and the principal preparation training was most effective when district leaders taught the courses for their future principals. Of note is that all districts, large and small, said their principal leadership development benefited greatly by partnering with outside organizations whether it was a university partner or a leadership group

such as the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement. Moreover, that leadership training embedded in leadership standards was seen by the districts as more intentional and leading to better outcomes for their leaders. To support leaders, the study found that larger districts in particular valued formal mentor programs where principals were assigned non-evaluative mentors.

### **Impact of Principal Turnover**

As described earlier, district's need to improve their succession planning because placing and then retaining good principals is critical for student achievement. Béteille et al. (2012) used longitudinal data from a large urban school district to study the relationship between principal turnover and school outcomes. They examined patterns of principal turnover and the impact of those patterns. The patterns they studied were the relationship between principal turnover to teacher turnover, student achievement, and the impact of that turnover to student achievement by school characteristics such as poverty, concentration of new teachers, and other criteria. Béteille et al. (2012) also looked at the quality of the teacher related to the turnover, finding that low performing teacher turnover had a positive impact on student achievement, whereas high performing teacher turnover had a negative impact on student achievement. This study also found that there is greater teacher turnover in both low and high performing teachers in a building when a new principal takes over, whether that principal is experienced or not in the principal role.

Moreover, Béteille et al. (2012) found that higher poverty schools had principals with fewer years of experience and less education than schools with more affluence. They also correlated principals with greater years of experience and more education to higher student achievement in the schools they served. Béteille et al. (2012) summarized their findings by

pointing to the discrepancy that higher poverty schools had more principal turnover and newer and less educated principals, contributing to lower student achievement than schools with greater affluence among their students. A source of this problem is that principals tended to leave higher poverty schools for schools with less poverty. This study demonstrates that the consequences of principal turnover in a school are detrimental to student achievement in high poverty schools in particular. The instability of leadership in high poverty schools leads to lack of cohesion among the staff and a lack of successful implementation of strategies that benefit student achievement. All schools, especially high poverty schools, need effective principals that stay around long enough for improvement strategies to be sustained.

Continuing this look into principal turnover and the impact on students, teachers, and schools, Henry and Harbatkin (2019) looked at eight years of administrative data in North Carolina through an empirical study and determined that most principal turnover is distinctly connected to decreased student achievement and increased teacher turnover. That said, they also accounted for principal turnover that did not lead to decreased student achievement. For example, a principal that is demoted to assistant principal is probably a low performer while one that is promoted into a district level position is probably a high performer, and the turnover of a low performing principal did not negatively impact student achievement or teacher turnover. Furthermore, this study looked at the impact of principal turnover during time of year, either mid-year and end of year, and found about the same amount of negative impact on student achievement and teacher turnover if a principal left mid-year or at the end of the year. They also acknowledged that principal turnover of a low performing principal is helpful to student achievement and teacher retention. This leads to the conclusion that if a principal is low performing, it is better for district administration to remove them during the school year rather

than wait until the end of the year. This study suggests that districts should understand the “mechanisms that may mediate or suppress the negative effects of principal turnover” (Henry & Harbatkin, 2019, p. 28), which leads to the need for school districts to have systems in place that ensure effective principals are leading schools and staying long enough to create a positive school culture where effective teachers stay, improvement strategies sustain, and student achievement rises.

The findings of Béteille et al. (2012) and Henry and Harbtkin (2019) are reinforced by Bartanen et al. (2019) and Miller (2013). Bartanen et al. (2019) studied longitudinal administrative data from the states of Missouri and Tennessee. This study looked at the impact on principal turnover on student achievement and teacher retention. Moreover, they studied different types of principal turnover (transfers, exits, promotions, and demotions) and the difference in the varied types of exits on student achievement and teacher retention. They also investigated the longevity of a principal at a building and that impact on student achievement. Bartanen et al. (2019) found that different types of exits have varied impacts on student achievement. For example, promotions of principals led to a decline in student achievement when those principals left, while exits, transfers, and demotions of principals led to an increase in student achievement. This likely happened because principals who were promoted were effective at their job and either the change itself or the new principal were detrimental to the school, and principals that were demoted were not effective in their role and replaced by more effective principals. This study did point to an important finding that the studies of Béteille et al. (2012) and Henry and Harbtkin (2019) did not find, which is that principal duration at a building does not necessarily lead to better student achievement or therefore more effective principals.

Furthermore, Miller (2013) studied the longitudinal data from the public schools in North Carolina looking at the relationship between principal turnover and student achievement data. An important finding from her work is that “it is difficult to disentangle the positive effects of having a new principal from what is merely a return to the permanent state of the school” (Miller, 2013, p. 71). This is because school performance typically dips before one principal leaves the building and another one steps in. This uptick in student achievement with a new principal, Miller (2013) asserts, might have happened if the first principal stayed. This leads to a discussion of principal effectiveness.

This wondering of Miller is highlighted in the work of Grissom and Bartanen (2019) who studied principal effectiveness as measured by evaluation results and rates of turnover from data in the state of Tennessee. What they found was that higher poverty schools, schools with low achievement, as well as middle schools had principals who stayed at the schools for a shorter duration than the elementary and high schools, more affluent, and higher performing schools. They also found that the principals with higher ratings on their evaluation were more likely to serve at more affluent schools with higher achievement and stay longer or exit for promotions.

Additionally, Bartanen et al. (2023) studied the years of experience of school principals related to student achievement and attendance by studying data gathered in Tennessee, Oregon, and New York City. This look into the relationship between principal longevity in their position and student achievement revealed that there is little relationship between principal years of experience and student achievement. Bartanen et al. (2023) looked at principal effectiveness through the lens of alignment to the knowledge and skills measured by national standards for administrators such as the National Policy Board for Education Administration and point to training that principals receive either pre-service or on the job and look at the impact of both on

their development toward the knowledge and skills identified by the standards. Through their study, Bartanen et al. (2023) note that aligning principal effectiveness to student achievement data and attendance is not a strong measure of principal improvement. They found little relationship between the principals' experience and their improved knowledge and skills of the job. This study notes that although it did not reveal a relationship between principal experience and school improvement, it does propose for one to consider the high turnover rate of the profession and call to question the impacts of this turnover on a principal making "meaningful contributions to school outcomes" (Bartanen et al., 2023, p.29). They also suggest that principal evaluations might not be a good identifier of effective principals for many reasons, but supervisor bias is a likely reason as the relationship grows over time between the supervisor and the principal. The study found that despite improved evaluation data over time for principals, student achievement did not improve.

### **Responsibilities of Effective Principals**

Liebowitz and Porter (2022) do point to some indicators of effective principals. They studied the professional experiences of educators in Oregon over a 14-year period and found that many principals gained valuable experiences in the role of assistant principal, but many (primarily elementary) principals moved from non-administrative jobs into the principalship. They also found that principals who were effective teachers prior to becoming principals were more effective at improving student achievement as principals and note that "there may be value in recruiting more effective teachers in the principalship" (Liebowitz & Porter, 2022, p.12). They also note that they believe that it is important that the instructional practices of the leader should be developed and nurtured as a leader of instruction in their buildings. Additionally, they share that various levels of principals seem to need different skill development, such as middle and

elementary principals needing more support with developing management and school discipline practices than high school principals.

To build on this idea that the work principals did prior to their principalship is an important indicator of an effective principal, Grissom et al. (2020) studied the pre-service jobs held and performance on those jobs of principals in Tennessee. From this study, Grissom et al. (2020) conclude that years of experience and formal education did not predict effectiveness of principals, but higher performance ratings in their previous roles such as teacher or assistant principal do lead to a more effective principal. They also note that assistant principals that served under high performing principals were more likely to be effective principals themselves. The findings of Grissom et al. (2022) lead to effective principal pipeline practices: the system districts use to identify and develop future principals. The study suggests that districts begin tracking their future principals by looking at the performance data of their teachers and then ensuring that they are placing new assistant principals with their most effective principals.

### **Principal Pipeline**

The first step to ensuring that schools have consistent and strong leadership in their buildings is to have a robust principal pipeline of assistant principals, teachers, and other teacher leaders that are ready to be tapped as the next principals. Currently school districts struggle to find good principal candidates with the right skills and motivation to become administrators, which is a principal pipeline problem (Bryant et al., 2017).

Bryant et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative case study to examine the effective practices districts, but in particular principals within the districts use, to prepare teachers to become principals. In addition to being critical for schools to thrive, principals have the potential to build a principal pipeline. This study found that principals that created a culture of shared leadership

contributed to trust between teachers and the principal. Teachers seeing themselves in leadership roles through authentic practice in leadership responsibilities within the safety of their buildings contributed to them pursuing principal positions. This study also found that a struggle for aspiring administrators within their buildings is the perceptions of other staff members of the aspiring administrators. Colleagues of the aspiring administrators demonstrating that they did not appreciate the aspiring administrators' pseudo leadership role was a negative experience. Bryant et al. (2017) demonstrated that having effective principals within buildings also perpetuates a healthy principal pipeline by encouraging teachers within the building to aspire to the principal position, which is an essential component of principal succession planning.

In addition to principals, other administrators involved in the principal pipeline are assistant principals. Assistant principals can build teacher leadership, and they are the closest leaders to the principal position. They are essentially "next up," and their development is sometimes overlooked in principal succession planning. Hayes and Burkett (2021) ran a single qualitative case study design of the perceptions of 26 assistant principals who participated in a university-district sponsored leadership academy for assistant principals on how the program helped them grow as leaders and advance their career. All the participants had at least three years of assistant principal experience, served in primary or secondary schools, and many of them had applied to principal positions and had not been selected.

The participants shared that the program helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses as a leader. They also reported that the program helped them develop their communication skills (especially around teacher feedback and difficult conversations), which helped them build rapport with teachers. Additionally, the participants shared that the program helped them grow as an instructional leader, and they indicated that they needed more

professional development. Sadly, most of them felt overlooked with professional development opportunities in general. For this special training they received, they appreciated the opportunity to grow in instructional leadership skills and wanted additional training in budgeting and finance. They also wanted a clearer connection to what they learned and what district leadership expected those skills to look like as a principal within their district. Another key learning from this study is that the participants also valued working in small group networks where they collaborated with their peers on leadership professional development, learning from each other and building relationships.

Another valued part of this assistant principal leadership training was that they were all assigned an individual coach. The practice and reflection that they had with their coach led to greater learning for the participants from their perspectives. That said, the participants wanted more district perspective on the learning they were acquiring to ensure it was meeting the needs of the district. This is where the aforementioned research by Zepeda et al. (2011) highlights the importance of district administrators teaching principal preparation classes with a university partner and/or leading leadership development such as the program described by Hayes and Burkett (2021) for assistant principals. Moreover, coaching is different than mentoring, and although the participants valued the coach, they wanted a mentor. A mentor/mentee relationship allows the mentee to be more vulnerable in their learning and seek support from their mentor that goes beyond the skills that a coach might focus on.

While Bryant et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of school principals in building the principal pipeline and Hayes and Burkett (2021) pointed to the importance of preparing assistant principals in the principal pipeline, Goldring et al. (2023) conducted a robust study that presents overall effective strategies for building a strong principal pipeline. They studied the findings

from the Principal Pipeline Learning Community, which was a group of 84 school districts of varied sizes who came together to help each other plan, develop, and learn about principal pipelines from each other. The participants were central office leaders who participated in the Principal Pipeline Learning Community (PPLC) from 2019-2022. Data from this study was from survey responses of 376 central office administrators from 62 districts and interviews with 86 central office administrators from 30 districts. It also needs to be noted that the PPLC did come together during the COVID pandemic, which was likely an influence on the participant responses. A guiding document for the PPLC was *The Principal Pipeline Self-Study Guide for Districts* from the Wallace Foundation. The key take-aways from this study are that districts should do the following:

- Consider pipelines from multiple types of leadership roles to move beyond the principal as the key leader.
- Pipeline work needs to be aligned to district goals. There is not a one-size fits-all approach.
- Ground the work in standards that constantly evolve to ensure they are still in-line with district goals and values, such as including standards around being equity-centered.
- Pipelines are critical to diversifying school leadership and they should be approached as such.
- Districts need a core team of leaders to oversee this work.
- This work should span across multiple departments in a district. For example, human resources should participate with principal supervisors.

- Districts need a “champion” to ensure pipelines are a priority and aligned to district goals.
- Districts should partner with universities and other outside leadership development organizations to strengthen their pipeline.
- Seek the help of current principals to develop the pipeline to understand the work of principals better.

This study by Goldring et al. (2023) has thorough recommendations for districts to consider when they strategize how to build their principal pipeline.

### **Principal Hiring**

Once a robust pipeline of principals is flowing, the next facet of principal succession planning that districts need to consider is their principal hiring practices. Hiring is a critical practice, and school districts need to have a strong pipeline of internal candidates as well as a process for hiring external candidates.

Sabina and Colwell (2018) completed a study of five Central Florida school districts’ practices related to internal and external hiring of candidates. The data was collected through interviews of district administrators, school principals, program coordinators, and aspiring administrators. Sabina and Cowell (2018) assert that with the shortage of principals it is critical that districts have strong practices in place to hire internal candidates while also considering external candidates. Ideally, districts’ principal pipelines would be so robust that hiring from within would be a given, and Sabina and Cowell (2018) assert that there are also strengths in hiring external candidates. Some of those strengths in hiring outside candidates include new perspectives, new connections, a fresh start with no baggage from having “grown-up” in the district. These strengths, of course, must be brought up against the challenges of hiring external

candidates: lack of understanding the district, resentment from internal candidates, and central administration's bias toward internal candidates (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Considering the pros and cons of hiring internally and externally for principals, Sabina, and Colwell (2018) assert that central school district administration needs to consider both internal and external candidates when hiring school principals because both internal and external candidates bring strengths to the district.

Moreover, Callahan (2017) surveyed 29 public school superintendents from a Central Texas education service center to explore how they consider the "skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities of effective school principals in the hiring and assessment" of principals at high performing schools (p. 24). This study correlated effective principals as principals aligned to Marzano's 21 responsibilities of effective principals (2005). Marzano's (2005) work with the responsibilities of effective principals was correlated to improved student achievement. What Callahan (2017) found was that superintendents mostly use references, material reviews, and interviews to assess the qualities of principals that they hired, and most superintendents aligned at least some of their selection process to aspects of Marzano's 21 responsibilities. Callahan (2017) details Marzano's 21 responsibilities as follows:

1. Affirmation: Recognizes and celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges failures.
2. Change Agent: Is willing to actively challenge the status quo.
3. Contingent Rewards: Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments.
4. Communication: Establishes strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students.
5. Culture: Fosters shared beliefs and sense of community and cooperation.

6. Discipline: Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus.
7. Flexibility: Adapts their leadership style to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent.
8. Focus: Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention.
9. Ideas/Beliefs: Communicates and operates from strong ideas and beliefs about schooling.
10. Input: Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.
11. Intellectual stimulation: Makes sure staff are aware of most current theories and practices.
12. Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment: Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
13. Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment: Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.
14. Monitoring/evaluating: Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning.
15. Optimizer: Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations.
16. Order: Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines.
17. Outreach: Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders.
18. Relationship: Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff.

19. Resources: Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs.
20. Situational awareness: Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses the information to address current and potential problems.
21. Visibility: Has quality contact and interactions with staff and students. (pp. 62-71)

Callahan (2017) suggests that superintendents would have principals that possess Marzano's 21 responsibilities if they ensured their hiring process evaluated how candidates possessed those responsibilities. For example, a superintendent would need to ensure they have interview questions that assess those responsibilities. Similarly, principal candidates would benefit from understanding the 21 responsibilities, so they could intentionally build those skills and are then strong candidates to be selected. This idea of building up skills in principal candidates is an important part of the afore-discussed principal pipeline work.

Like Callahan, Hensley et al. (2013) studied the hiring practices superintendents use to learn how their hiring practices are aligned to standards put out by the National Policy Board for Education Administration. For this study, those standards were ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium), but current standards are the PSEL (Professional Standards for Education Leaders). Oregon adopted PSEL standards in 2023 and districts are expected to align their administrator evaluation system to these standards. The interviews by Hensley et al. (2013) of nine superintendents from northeast Missouri revealed that superintendents had some focus on the standards, but Hensley et al. (2013) assert that school districts would hire stronger principals who have beliefs and responsibilities aligned to the standards if they more intentionally aligned their hiring practices to the standards. This assertion is similar to Callahan's (2017) argument,

but Callahan (2017) used Marzano's 21 leadership responsibilities not state or national standards like Hensley et al. (2013) suggest.

### **Principal Retention**

With a strong principal pipeline and effective hiring practices in place, the next problem that districts need to address in their principal succession planning is principal retention. How districts onboard and then support hired principals is critical to keeping strong leaders at the helm in school buildings. Principal support is critical to retention. Swen (2018) interviewed 35 new principals from Chicago Public Schools. She focused on how principals stay motivated to do the high-demand job of school principal. She cites that "25% of principals leave their jobs in the first year" (p. 177) due to the stress from a job that is complex, isolating, and ambiguous (p. 179). Swen's study (2018) found three "*calling narratives*" among principals (p. 178). These narratives include "*destiny* to be educators, a *duty* to serve students, and a *fulfillment* (or delight) that comes from their work" (p. 178). Swen (2018) reveals in her study that new principals with a sense of "calling" or a sense of destiny for the work, endure the challenges of their job when they stay focused on that "calling;" therefore, understanding what motivates new principals will help districts support and retain principals.

Similarly, Briscoe and Wild (2020) completed a case narrative of one principal that was new to his school, and they point to the difficulty of the principalship in their study that relates to principals burning out and leaving their jobs. They share that "the daily routines, role expectations, frequent unintended disruptive events, subsequent follow-up (e.g., paperwork, phone calls, etc.) and feelings of hopelessness" lead to the need to support principals with how to manage these stressful work demands and retain principals in their roles (Briscoe & Wild, 2020, p. 33). With this level of stress in mind due to an overwhelming workload, Briscoe and Wild

(2020) suggest that principals engage in energy management instead of time management. They state that “all the calendars, to-do lists, and bullet journals are useless if you are too fatigued to accomplish the tasks on those lists” (p. 34). They go on to suggest activities that principal preparation or leadership training can use with future or current principals to help them think about how they are using their energy rather than how they are using their time.

Bauer et al. (2019) used survey data from 164 first-year principals from a wide-range of school districts across the southern United States to study principal retention. Their study found that principal isolation and the numerous demands of the job can be mitigated through mentoring and supervisor support in removing tasks and providing resources to complete tasks more efficiently. Furthermore, Bauer et al. (2017) studied the impacts of isolation on principals and concluded that social support, such as mentors contacting them regularly to help them navigate the many demands of their jobs helped retain principals.

Clearly mentors play an important role in supporting principals in their complex jobs. For principals to have self-efficacy and be effective leaders they need support, and they need support to help them manage their stress. Support for the technical skills as well as the stress of the job is needed to retain principals in their roles.

Gentilucci et al. (2013) conducted respondent-driven interviews of 11 principals and investigated the specific type of support principals need. Based on their study, they assert that principals need support with managerial and “‘soft’ skills, such as active listening and trust-building in addition to traditional ‘hard’ skills of finance, law, and program evaluation” (p. 75). They note that in many school districts, principals are left to their own to find support with those skills; therefore, Gentilucci et al. (2013) recommend that school districts and principal

preparation programs, principal supervisors, and mentors provide instruction and support in soft and hard skills, so principals can successfully navigate the complexities of their roles.

Moreover, Celoria and Roberson (2015) conducted a qualitative study of 23 new principals and 34 principal coaches in the San Francisco Bay Area about coaching for new principals. Their study was conducted through interviews and then a case study of a few of the participants that were interviewed. Celoria and Roberson (2015) concluded that coaching is valued as supportive by new principals because it provides a safe a person to talk to and a supportive thought partner for making difficult decisions, which is hard to find in a supervisor because having emotionally charged and/or conversations that show insecurities may not be seen as appropriate. This study shows that principals need coaching that supports them emotionally and thoughtfully through the many decisions they make as leaders to keep them from resigning their positions. Celoria and Roberson (2015) found the following coaching practices to be supportive of principals:

- Safe space to have emotional conversations, and a coach who is a safe person.
- Principals feel safe confronting their insecurities with the coach.
- Support with decision making. Coaches ask questions and guide principals thinking through their decisions.
- A non-judgmental and supportive relationship between the coach and principal.

This study did not differentiate between coaching and mentoring and combined those roles that other studies separated because they were seen as different.

Specific to mentoring, Bertrand et al. (2018) examined the perspectives of first and second-year principals who were part of the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Project, interviewing six second and third-year principals from both elementary and secondary schools.

The findings from this study reported an effective mentor for principals had the following characteristics and practices:

- Proximity and contact between mentor and mentee. Mentors and mentees both appreciate the ability to meet in person. It helps the relationship grow and addresses the needs of the principal better than connecting remotely.
- The prior experience of the mentor is important. The more like the principal role the mentor had to the mentee, the better. Understanding the work of the mentee is critical.
- Collaborative and effective goal setting for the mentee and training for the mentor on how to run the process is also important for successful mentoring.
- Trust and relationship building are critical to mentoring. Mentees needed to be able to be vulnerable and get answers to their questions from a reliable and trustworthy mentor.

All the literature reviewed highlights that principal succession planning is critical for school districts to do well, and ultimately leads to improved student achievement. All schools need principals that have skills and beliefs that are aligned to a district's identified standards for effective principals. To do this, districts should align their pipeline, hiring, and support practices to hire and retain principals that will positively impact student achievement, retain staff, and help the district obtain its goals.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHOD**

#### **Current Study**

The goal of this study is to provide research grounded guidance on how to operationalize principal succession planning within a school district. Within principal succession planning, this study focused on two phases in succession planning: (a) Identifying and developing future principals; and (b) developing and supporting principals who are new to their role, and more specifically within their first three years.

#### **Research Questions**

The present case study used a qualitative methods approach consisting of both interviews and a survey to gather rich information to understand the opinions and experiences that participants had about principal succession planning within their school district.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are effective principal succession planning practices within a school district?

#### **Supporting Sub-questions**

What are the applied district's identified responsibilities and skills of an effective principal?

What are the applied district's current principal pipeline practices? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?

What are the applied district's current practices to develop skills and responsibilities of effective principals in newly hired principals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?

## Setting

The setting for this research study was a large school district in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Data was collected from this district during the 2023-24 school year. The district serves about 42,000 students, about 70% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and about 50% of whom are students of color. The district's vision is that "all students graduate prepared for a successful life," and this district has a discrepancy between groups of students' graduation rates. There is a discrepancy in graduation rates between student groups such as white and non-white, students served in special education and those who are not, and students that are designated language learners and those who are not. Here is the breakdown of some of the student groups within the district's Four-Year Graduation Rates from the Oregon Department of Education School Report Cards 2021-22: White 85%, Latino/Hispanic 77%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 66%, English Learner 78%, and Students with Disabilities 68% (Oregon Department of Education). Noting these graduation rate discrepancies within student groups, this district has a strong equity focus and a core belief in ensuring "all students graduate and are prepared for a successful life" as their vision statement asserts. To realize this vision, this district needs to ensure effective principals are in the driver's seat in each of their school buildings.

For this study, the researcher conducted a case study to explore the central and sub questions. A case study method was chosen because the researcher was looking into a "bounded system" (a school district) for an in-depth account of how participants answer the research questions (Cresswell & Gutterman, p. 477). For this study, the researcher engaged in "purposeful sampling" of participants, by selecting school principals, assistant principals, and central office

administrators who are most impacted or responsible for principal succession planning within the school district the researcher serves (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 206).

The principals selected were principals that are in their first three years of being assigned to a building. The researcher chose principals who are in their first three years of being assigned to a building because they are living or have recently lived the experience of being hired or transferred to a new school building. The researcher believes that both principals new to the role and those new to buildings have support needs the district might not be addressing as well as it could be. For central office administrators, the researcher interviewed the district's superintendent, director of human resources, director of strategic initiatives for human resources, deputy superintendents (2), and the level directors for elementary (2), middle (1), and high school (1) all of whom are ultimately responsible for principal succession planning and ensuring that every school has an effective principal. Level directors in the studied district are the direct supervisors of principals for their respective levels. The researcher serves as an elementary level director for the studied district.

The researcher offered a survey to all the K-12 assistant principals (45) because they are an important facet of the principal pipeline. Of the 45 assistant principals offered the survey, 17 responded. The response of only 17 of the 45 assistant principals was likely due to the anonymity of the survey and the long working hours of assistant principals. They had little time available to them and no accountability to complete the survey.

### **Sources of Data**

The researcher interviewed nine principals and nine central office administrators and sent a survey to all 45, K-12 assistant principals. Seventeen of the assistant principals responded to

the anonymous survey. An important intent of the researcher using these data sources (surveys and the interviews) was to be able to triangulate the data collected.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To collect data, the researcher developed and sent a survey via a Google form to all K-12 assistant principals. The survey questions were closed as well as open-ended. The researcher interviewed the principals and central office administrators through a series of open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview protocol. The researcher had pre-determined questions but allowed for flexibility to ask follow-up questions and explore participants' experiences and insights. Each interview took about 30 minutes. The researcher used transcribing software to transcribe the interviews in preparation for analysis. The researcher interviewed three principals at each grade level within the district. Of the principals interviewed at each school level (elementary, middle, and high), the researcher interviewed principals new to the principal role in the district. In addition to the principals, the researcher interviewed central office administrators. By the time the researcher interviewed four level directors, two deputy superintendents, the director of human resources, the director of strategic initiatives for human resources, and the superintendent, the researcher had nine central office interviews completed.

### **Interview Questions for Data Collection**

Central Office Administrator

1. What are the skills and responsibilities of an effective principal in our district?
2. How do we know they are effective?
3. Describe the system the district uses to build a principal pipeline.
4. What do you see as strengths and opportunities in the district's strategies to build a principal pipeline?

5. Describe the support the district offers principals who are new to the role.
6. What do you see as strengths and weaknesses in the way the district supports new principals?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

#### School Principal

1. Describe your journey to becoming a principal.
2. How well did your principal licensure program prepare you for your job?
3. What were the strengths of that program and what were the weaknesses?
4. Have you participated in any additional leadership development program or training in addition to your licensure program?
5. If so, what was the program/training and what were the strengths and weaknesses of that program?
6. Describe the support you have received as a new principal.
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of that support?
8. What are the skills and responsibilities of an effective principal in our district?
9. What could the district do better to help principals be effective in their role?
10. Do you have a(n) assistant principal(s)?
11. What do you see as your role in developing them as principals?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Survey Questions for Data Collection

### Assistant Principals

1. Do you work at an elementary, middle, or high school? (select option)
2. Do you want to be a principal? Yes/No
3. Why or why not? (open-ended)
4. How well did your administrator licensure program prepare you for your current job?  
(Scale 1-5)
5. How well did the program prepare you to become a principal? (Scale 1-5)
6. What were the strengths of that program and what were the weaknesses? (open-ended)
7. Have you participated in any leadership development programs or training in addition to your licensure program? Yes/No
8. If so, what was the program and what were the strengths and weaknesses of that program? (open-ended)
9. What are the responsibilities and skills of an effective principal in our district? (open-ended)
10. How successful is the district at hiring effective principals? (1-5)
11. What could the district do better to help principals be effective in their role? (open-ended)
12. What could the district do better to help assistant principals become effective principals?  
(open-ended)

13. Is there anything else that you would like to add? (open-ended)

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from transcribed interviews with central office and school principals and the survey responses of assistant principals served as the primary data for this study. Once the interviews were transcribed and the surveys were collected, the researcher began with open coding “to form initial categories of information” on all data collected during the study (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 436).

The next phase of coding the researcher did was “axial coding,” where they took one category and related it to other categories, identifying the “causal conditions . . . , strategies . . . , contextual and intervening conditions . . . , and consequences” (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 439). This axial coding was based off of a core category, which were: (a) central to all other categories; (b) appeared often in the data; (c) had a logical relationship with the other categories; (d) had an abstract name; (e) allowed the theory to grow in depth by defining this central category; and (f) stayed the same if conditions changed (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 447).

Following this analysis, the researcher wrote a theory based on the relationships of the data, and then began “selective coding,” to develop a storyline for the relationships in the data and came to a grounded theory (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, pp. 439-440). Cresswell and Guetterman (2019, p. 447) describe this as an essential component of grounded theory because grounded theory is “an abstract explanation or understanding of a process about a substantive topic grounded in data.” Landing on a grounded theory led the researcher to a report where the “problem, methods, discussion, and results” were included to explain the theory developed from analyzing the data collected (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 454).

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected in respect to the central research question of this study: “What are effective principal succession planning practices within a school district?” The perspective is from central office administrators responsible for hiring and supporting effective principals, principals from elementary, middle, and high, who are new to their role, and assistant principals who serve in all three levels of schools within the district of study. The questions asked each group of administrators were designed to answer three supporting sub questions of the central research question:

- What are the applied district’s identified responsibilities and skills of an effective principal?
- What are the applied district’s current principal pipeline practices? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?
- What are the applied district’s current practices to develop skills and responsibilities of effective principals in newly hired principals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?

The perspectives of those that hire, support, and supervise principals, principals themselves, and assistant principals who support principals and are building their readiness to become principals led to some nuance in responses, but central themes arose from all three groups that informed this study.

**Supporting Sub-Question: What are the applied district’s identified responsibilities and skills of an effective principal?**

Through analyzing responses to the first supporting sub-question: What are the applied district’s identified responsibilities and skills of an effective principal, the following themes arose of skills and responsibilities of effective principals:

- Visionary
- Instructional leader
- Communicative
- Collaborator
- Manager
- Emotionally intelligent
- Adaptable
- Student-centered & Equity driven
- Learner
- Decision-maker
- Data informed
- Culture-builder

The following is a closer look into how these themes arose and the participants thoughts on these themes. Visionary leadership was the most common response from all 35 participants. Twenty-six out of the 35 participants said something related to the importance of a principal being a visionary leader. One central office administrator described an effective principal as “somebody that has a vision for their school, a vision for what they want their school to become,

needs to become.” This theme of being a visionary leader goes deeper than seeing a vision for what their school can become. It also involves the ability for the principal to get the staff behind that vision and the work to attain it. Another central office administrator said, “Most importantly, [the effective principal] need[s] to be able to develop a vision that others can follow.” This ability to not only have a vision, but communicate that vision, and make the steps toward realizing that vision clear to staff was prevalent in the participant responses. Another central office administrator said, “If you don’t know how to bring people together to work towards the same goals, you won’t ever make progress with kids.” They described an effective principal as able to lay out the work. Moreover, one principal described an effective principal as “a visionary with action steps.” They can lay out what needs to happen, which according to another principal, “seems cohesive” for all the staff in the building. An important facet to an effective principal being a visionary leader is that, as one assistant principal, they have a “strong and clear vision that is grounded in the local needs of the school.” An important nuance here is that one’s vision should make sense for the school and the needs of the students.

Of note is that seven participants directly called out effective principals’ seeing the “big picture” and connecting their vision to the district vision. Those participants were from all three administrative groups (central office, principals, and assistant principals). This notion of not setting a vision in a silo came forward coupled with the belief that building a vision needs to be connected to the district strategic plan, which is aligned to the needs of students within the district.

The next responsibility that arose from the participant responses was communication. Seventeen of the 35 participants explicitly called out communication as a responsibility of an effective principal. This was tied to visionary leadership in that clear communication of the

vision and steps to get there was critical to staff engaging in the work to realize the vision. One central office administrator described an effective principal as having a “vision for success that they can hold in their mind, break into pieces, and communicate that to their staff.” Without communication of a clear vision, staff cannot follow it, and therefore a vision will never be realized.

Beyond communicating a vision, the participants described a “clear communicator” as a good listener. The researcher has folded listening into communication for this study and specifically listening to understand. One principal described an effective principal as someone who listens for the purpose of “not offering answers [ . . . ] but helping you find them within yourself.” They described an effective principal as using good communication skills to relate to and help their staff problem-solve.

In addition to being a good listener and articulating the steps to take to realize a vision, the communication skills the participants described were as sense makers. For example, one assistant principal described an effective principal as one who “can take what is shared with them and make it meaningful to their building.” This quote is in reference to district level information or initiatives that principals are asked to implement in their buildings, and the principal making sense of what that needs to look like for their building and communicating that to staff. This describes a principal who can filter and communicate what is important to their staff to keep their work towards meeting their vision on target. This idea of being a sense-maker through communication was also described by another assistant principal as someone who “understands and shares the why and clearly articulates the what and how.” Effective principals are those that communicate in a way that makes sense for their staff. This sense-making through communication connects to clarity of communication leading to staff understanding. One central

office administrator said of an effective principal, “You need to be clear and honest, and we know that clear is kind.” Clarity and sense-making through communication were strongly identified as responsibilities of effective principals.

Another important responsibility of effective principals that participants identified was collaboration. Twelve of the 35 participants identified a principal’s ability to collaborate with staff as an effective responsibility. Collaboration was discussed as needed to realize the vision of the building through building others’ leadership and by supporting the principal. Collaboration was described by one central office administrator as identifying that an effective principal “understands that the job is a shared leadership” and that one “will not be effective” if they try to do everything by themselves. This central office administrator went on to say that an effective principal knows how to “piece out roles to the right people to put them in the best position to be as effective as they can be.” These central office administrator’s quotes show a theme of needing to collaborate to build up others and to succeed as a principal because there is too much work to be done, and trying to do it all by oneself will not lead to success.

Another facet of collaboration that came up was the importance of principals knowing how to collaborate with colleagues to find support and problem-solve. One principal shared that “it is important to have your support system of your people” to help you as a leader. The participants revealed that a principal needs to collaborate effectively to ensure their building is running well, that they are building others’ leadership, and so that they are finding support for themselves.

This ability to communicate and collaborate also centers on the theme of emotional intelligence that surfaced from the participants’ responses. Eighteen of the 35 participants identified social-emotional skills as important responsibilities of an effective principal. One

central office administrator described an effective principal as one that is “easy to follow, is easy to listen to, [and] that has the personal connection and touch to move people.” Furthermore, the skills to connect with people in a way that motivates them were described by the participants as having an ability to relate to staff, students, and families. Another central office administrator framed this in questions principals can ask themselves: “Do I relate well to parents, to teachers, and students?” This ability to relate to people was identified by participants as connected to knowing how to motivate and care for them. One central office administrator described an effective principal as “someone who understands people and how to be an empathetic listener but also understands how to move people forward in their own practice.”

Additionally, these social emotional intelligence skills were seen as foundational. Another central office administrator said that an effective principal is “someone who can build relationships, someone that’s a people person that really understands how to connect to people because I think that’s the foundation of everything we do.” These skills of being “people-oriented” as described by one assistant principal were seen as being relational, supportive, approachable, collaborative, and motivational.

Another responsibility that emerged from the participants’ responses was the ability to be a strong instructional leader. Eleven out of 35 participants pointed to this skill as being important. These participants pointed to the principal having a strong instructional background as important for them to be able to do the work of an instructional leader. One assistant principal said an effective principal should have “solid experience in the classroom.” This is because, according to one central office administrator, “they have to have the instructional knowledge and focus to keep students on track.” The participants pointed out the importance of classroom experience to have the instructional understanding to know how to “make adjustments to

improve student learning,” as one assistant principal responded. Instructional leaders need to know why to do something and why not do something related to instruction. As one central office administrator said regarding principal knowledge of curriculum and instruction, “They have to have an idea of what is right and what is not.” Being able to support student learning through instructional leadership was identified as an important responsibility of an effective principal.

The most consistently identified skill or responsibility of an effective principal identified by all three groups of participants was managerial skills. Twenty-three of the 35 participants identified this as an important responsibility. One central office administrator pointed to the need for a principal to be an instructional leader and a manager, stating that a principal needs the “skills to balance curriculum and instruction with school operations.” Another central office administrator noted that combination of skills by saying that there needs to be an “interconnection between the subject matter and the operationalizing of things.”

Moreover, to be a good manager, the participants described different managerial skills such as knowing how to do budget and human resources processes. One principal talked about principals needing to be “really good at complex budgets” while also knowing how to run “HR investigations.” A more general managerial skill participants described was organization. One assistant principal wrote that a principal needs to be an “organizer (both of work and teams).” Part of organizing work and teams is creating systems. A central office administrator described the outcome of being organized as having “predicable routines in the building for adults and students.” Another assistant principal described this responsibility or skill in a principal as someone who “understands how to maximize systems that allow for work to be done in a way that is meaningful and manageable.”

It was also shared that being organized helps principals reduce stress for themselves and for their school community. One central office administrator said that principals “need to be organized enough” to “balance [their] life.” The idea shared was that if one is organized at work and getting work done efficiently, then they will have more time at home, not working. Additionally, this skill of organization leads to staff knowing what to do to help the building and help each other. One assistant principal described a scenario: “If there is a group working on a task, all people are well-versed and can support each other.” When people support each other and know what to do to support each other, there is order and less stress in a building.

Another important part of managerial skills that the participants pointed out was follow-through. A principal said, “You have to do what you say you’re going to do.” Similarly, a central office administrator said that principals need to “actually follow-through with processes.” Simply put, good managers follow through. Furthermore, a good manager was described as someone who knows how to delegate, which also relates to the aforementioned responsibility of collaboration. A central office administrator described this delegation of responsibility as a “constant micro and macro catching and releasing of tasks and work.” This description of assigning tasks/responsibilities and checking in on them, guiding them is a managerial responsibility.

Another responsibility seven of the 35 participants pointed to was adaptability. They described the need for the principal to be reflective and change course if needed. One central office administrator said:

A good principal also slows down to listen to staff and get feedback and then makes changes on that feedback because they’re not a boss; they’re a leader. They’re a person who’s willing to learn and change themselves because there is a lot to learn every day.

It was shared that adaptability is also based on one's ability to be reflective and flexible. An assistant principal stated that an effective principal is "reflective and makes adjustments to improve student learning and students'/staff's sense of belonging." This attribute of receiving feedback and being flexible enough to adjust a plan, system, behavior, etc. is one part of adaptability and another part is adjusting and multi-tasking to meet the needs of the school. One assistant principal described this as "doing multiple roles, often at the same time." While another assistant principal tied this back to reflection and wrote that a principal must "recognize [their] weaknesses and biases [ . . . ] to know how to work WITH people to help students be successful no matter their background." This adaptability tied to reflection was also described by another central office administrator who said, "I think part of their effectiveness is them monitoring their own work and being able to speak to that and make course corrections as needed."

This idea of learning to connect with others also emerged from three of the 35 participants as being a lead learner and teacher of others. One principal described this responsibility as someone who is a "leader that develops teacher leaders." They look to build others up and help them grow as leaders. An assistant principal described this responsibility as being a "role model inside and outside of the school/district." An effective principal shows others how to work and behave by their actions even when they are away from the school building. And another assistant principal described an effective principal as a "learner." Although not a robust theme that emerged from the participant responses, this is a responsibility that was also described in a way that related to being an adaptable listener who is willing to learn from others and make adjustments.

Another theme that was identified by participants was the responsibility of being a decision-maker. Eight of 35 participants identified this responsibility. One central office

administrator said that principals need to be able to “problem-solve and be able to do that on their own.” This central office administrator wanted the principal to not depend on their supervisor to make decisions for them. Another central office administrator wanted “students firsthand” when principals make decisions. This central office administrator pointed to making student-centered decisions. While one of the principals described an effective principal as thinking through decisions like a chess player, being strategic: “It’s more like a chess match and finding your rook and your knight and your different players” that can help with the work and help make a decision. This principal also pointed to the need for collaboration in decision-making. Another principal pointed to the need to make quick decisions sometimes and at other times take one’s time to make decisions. They said, “It’s about good decision-making skills and decisions that need to be made now and decisions that could be delayed and knowing when to do that.” This points to the principal’s skill in knowing what kind of decision one is making and whom to involve in that decision to be a good decision-maker. Another facet of decision-making was linked to communication. One assistant principal said, a principal should be “collaborative but capable of making a decision.” They should “lead by example and share their decision-making process.”

Another responsibility or skill that emerged from the participants’ responses was being data informed. This was a responsibility that 14 of the 35 participants identified. This was described as both something that a principal does and something that one sees as a result of their work. Half of the responses regarding data came from central office administrators while the other half of the responses came from principals and assistant principals. Central office administrators talked more about principal outcomes measured by data than the building level administrators did. For example, one central office administrator said about data, “I want to see

at least incremental progress.” Another central office administrator spoke to wanting a “dashboard” of our schools to see “where they are with key metrics that would be an early warning system about a principal not necessarily being super adept.” Furthermore, one central office administrator pointed to the need to own their work and monitor themselves through data: “I think part of their effectiveness is them monitoring their own work and being able to speak to that and make course corrections as needed.” Furthermore, a principal described an effective principal as someone who is “data informed and driven.” Participants pointed to data as a source to monitor principal effectiveness because principals who are effective will show growth in student outcomes data, and principals also need to use the data themselves to guide their work and make sure they are doing the right work to realize their school vision.

The last skill or responsibility that emerged from eight of the 35 participants was the ability to be a culture-builder. The participants spoke about a healthy school culture being the result of an effective principal and an indicator of success either currently happening or happening soon. A central office administrator said:

I think an effective principal can create a culture of improvement that may take a couple of years to see in student outcomes, but that you can see sooner in the attitudes of staff and the eagerness of staff to try things, to support each other [and are] a community of learners.

Another central office administrator described this staff interaction in a positive culture as being seen “through staff being able to talk about their own practice in ways that make them motivated to improve.” Another sign of a healthy culture in a building is as a central office administrator described, “The emergence of good little things that everybody’s just a little bit excited about. You can feel that that there is a little bit of a community growing around it.” This is a result of a

principal who has as another central office administrator described “nurture[ed]” their staff like a “caring parent” and brought up “a kid [school staff] that is strong [and] is independent.” These actions of staff were described as a result of a skilled culture-builder. A central office administrator said, “When there’s patterns and good stories, you usually know that there’s somebody there who’s helping lead the magic.” This administrator referred to an effective principal as leading a healthy culture.

**Supporting Sub-Question: What are the applied district’s current principal pipeline practices? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?**

What follows is a look into the responses related to the second sub question: What are the applied district’s current principal pipeline practices? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices? The following themes emerged around where or how the applied district identifies and develops future principals. These are as follows:

- In the school building or in a role other than being a principal
  - Pathway includes teaching and then other teacher leadership roles
  - Role of principal in developing leadership/principal skills
  - Assistant principal perspectives on role of principal and desire for the job
- District’s Aspiring Administrator program
- University administrator preparation programs

The first theme that emerged was the influence of the work and people within a school building on becoming a principal. Thirty of the 35 participants discussed this influence. Specifically, participants talked about their pathway starting as a teacher and then becoming a teacher leader. Eight of the nine principals interviewed talked about the length or the importance of their teaching experience in becoming a principal. One principal described themselves as a

“reluctant principal” because they wanted to build their credibility as a teacher before becoming an administrator. This principal taught for 12 years before becoming an assistant principal, and six of the nine principals pointed to their years in the classroom, ranging from eight to 15 years. Six of the nine principals also talked about their teacher leadership roles. For five of the six principals, their teacher leadership role was as an instructional mentor (coach), and one of the principals was an AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Coordinator who never stepped away from the classroom, as opposed to the instructional mentor role, which was a full-time position outside of the classroom. Moreover, two of the elementary principals who also became instructional mentors talked about their time as demonstration teachers as a pathway for them to becoming a principal.

In these teacher leader roles, the principals talked about the skills they learned. For example, one principal talked about learning how to structure an unstructured day: “There’s no job like creating the structure for your day.” That same principal talked about that they chose to become an instructional mentor even after obtaining their administrative license because they wanted more leadership experience before seeking principal jobs: “Right after the admin program, it was kind of frowned upon, but I did the instructional coach route at the time.”

Another principal noted that it was not until they became an instructional mentor that they began to consider becoming a principal: “I was a classroom teacher for many years, wasn’t considering admin at that point. But when I switched to being an instructional mentor, stepping out into that kind of big-picture role is helpful in thinking about administrative things.” There was also an understanding shared that becoming an instructional mentor would help others who hire principals get to know their work. A principal shared: “I guess more people got to know my work.”

Central Office administrators also pointed to the value of teacher leadership roles. One central office administrator described the roles of instructional mentor and behavior specialist as “key” to building future principals because it helps the person understand “the view from the balcony.” Another central office administrator described those jobs as gatekeepers to becoming a principal: “If you want to move up in the world, you’re passing through one of those gates.” These two examples demonstrate differing perspectives on the value of those two teacher leadership roles. Two other central office administrators pointed to less formal teacher leadership roles as important in developing future principals. One central office administrator said in looking for people to become administrators, they look for “a staff member [who has] volunteer[ed] to run a school committee or demonstrates a willingness to be involved in programs or initiatives that support the school.” Another central office administrator described future principals as staff who serve on the school “leadership team, taking little leadership tasks.”

This leads to another theme that arrived from the participant responses, which is that beyond teacher leadership roles, the district has additional ways to identify and develop future principals. One thing that the district does to identify and develop future principals is something the district calls Aspiring Administrators. Nine of the 35 participants discussed Aspiring Administrators. Through their discussion of it, they pointed out many strengths and weaknesses. One of the weaknesses of the program was noted by one central office administrator as having a lack of diversity, describing the cohort of the current year’s Aspiring Administrators as “very homogenous, meaning it was primarily like middle-aged white women.” Another central office administrator noted that “the Aspiring Administrators recruitment wasn’t effective, and so we maybe hired two people out of the people that got in. And I think it’s because the level directors were not involved in that.” While another central office administrator pointed to a change in

practice where level directors are more involved with the Aspiring Administrators, “so that [they’re] training the people that are coming to work for [them].” A central office administrator spoke to the need for Aspiring Administrators to move away from more technical pieces like budget and hiring to more of developing “habits of mind and the thinking and philosophy and the kind of sense-making pieces, emotional intelligence pieces of it that really we need to hire and retain people in those roles.” And another central office administrator noted that the district has not had the right people in Aspiring Administrators. They quoted central office administrator thoughts on this by saying, ‘Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think you’re going to be a principal. But you’ve tried.’ This central office administrator continued by saying, “I think we have to have stronger criteria and the guts to say no.”

The principals’ perspectives of Aspiring Administrators differed from the central office administrators’ perspectives. A principal pointed to the competitive feeling of being an Aspiring Administrator: “I think it’s also kind of highly competitive in a way because it feels like you’re competing for the position, which, I mean, in a sense, you are.” Another principal noted that Aspiring Administrators was essential to their success as a principal. They said, “The magic of the transition for me from not being a principal to being and admin was the Aspiring Administrator program because that makes you so involved in district decision-making departments.” This principal noted that getting “facetime” with department heads was valuable as part of Aspiring Administrators because a principal needs to collaborate with them. This person said, “I feel like that piece was essential for me.”

In addition to Aspiring Administrators and teacher leadership roles, being an assistant principal is an important way that the district identifies and develops the skills of future principals. Assistant principals in the study said that they want to be known by the level directors

and other central office administrators. One assistant principal wrote, “I have frequently wished the level leadership got to know my work and skills.” Another assistant principal wrote, “The reality is I’ve not been asked about my work, my strengths, my ambition or lack thereof, and well anything, since my interview.” This assistant principal highlighted a lack of communication with the district, which leads to them wondering what the district has in mind for them or where they need to develop. This assistant principal went on to say that if they do not know where they need to develop to become a principal, they “can’t intentionally take steps to grow in that way.”

Similarly, another assistant principal spoke of the need for clearer communication from the district. They wrote, “Provide clarity around what is needed to be a principal [and have conversations] around what needs to happen (improve or demonstrate) to be considered for a principal position.” Another assistant principal said that when they interviewed for a principal position and did not get the job, they received clear feedback on next steps and that was helpful: “The feedback that I received helped me know where I stand as a future principal and what I need to work on.” Another assistant principal warned that the district’s lack of identifying the leadership skills principals need paired with a lack of support to develop those skills, leads the district to lose good leaders: “Minimal effort is put into developing leaders, either at the AP or Principal level. As a result, we wear out and lose good leaders, without ever even having clearly articulated the leadership skills the district was looking for in the first place, let alone developed them as people and as leaders.”

Collaboration was discussed by assistant principals as important to their development toward becoming principals. One assistant principal pointed to COSA’s (Coalition of Oregon School Administrators) new assistant principal conference as helpful because of not only the content but also the networking. Another assistant principal pointed to appreciating “meeting

every other month with other APs and the LDs” because “the sharing of ideas and collaboration helps all of us grow as leaders.” Similarly, an assistant principal wrote about appreciating the time to “collaborate with my colleagues and learn from others” through professional development opportunities and specifically a “problems of practice” protocol because they receive “continual specific feedback toward improvement.” This assistant principal went on to say they appreciate that because “I need to know where I stand or compare to others in the areas of being an effective principal.” And another assistant principal pointed to a cohort of assistant principals led by principals at elementary, middle, and high school that was helpful because they got to talk through issues and concerns and meet with different department leaders.

Principals were also seen as important to the identification and development of future principals. One central office administrator said, “The most important person in those AP lives for career development is going to be the principal.” Another central office administrator noted that although the district has not explicitly called out the role of principal in developing assistant principals to become principals, they play a critical role in doing that. A central office administrator demonstrated this expectation by including “general questions at every site visit” with principals on how the assistant principals are doing. Asking the principal what their assistant principal needs to improve on and how the principal is supporting that growth was important to this central office administrator.

And, although participants saw principals as important to growing assistant principals and teacher leaders, they also pointed to a lack of clarity around and expectation or training to do this. One central office administrator noted the need for a system to do this: “I think if you can have a system for having an expectation for principals to start grooming the next wave of leadership in the way that they do evaluations and the way they talk to their staff about their

future goals, so that they can start building a self-efficacy that they can become a leader.” Two principals pointed to their desire to have more understanding of how to develop leadership in their buildings. One of them said, “I really wish that I had more time to or a better ability to be a developer of people.”

Some of the things that principals have done to develop principals were described in various ways. One principal described how they learn how to best support their assistant principals at a beginning of the work year meeting much like the district’s “initial conference” with teachers each year. This is followed by bi-weekly check-ins to see how they are doing. This principal also described how they work to create a well-rounded experience for assistant principals, so they are prepared to be principals. Additionally, they explained the importance of their own modeling. They said, “I learned a lot by just having models in front of me. So, I think that’s super, super important, that we’re always learning by watching.” This goes along with how another principal said they learned a lot about how to interact with staff members and manage conflict by watching their supervising principal as an assistant principal. Another principal reiterated how important they believe modeling for their assistant principals is and said, that they were “so glad that [they] got put into a school [with] a strong leader” when they were an assistant principal. Because, they said, “That really helped me to see and then model some responsibilities after that.”

In addition to modeling, principals that created safe places for assistant principals to fail and feel supported were brought forward as important. One principal said they believe that it is important to give assistant principals “the freedom, the autonomy, and the support for them to excel in those things and let them do those things. This same principal creates a space in the weekly administrator team meetings to process problems together. They described how they did

this to create a safe place to talk about issues and to help assistant principals develop the capacity to help each other. Another principal talked about wanting the assistant principal to know that she trusts her judgement and will back her up if she makes a mistake. The principal said that assistant principals “have to know that because then you won’t take risks if you don’t know that,” and that learning happens when we take risks. Another principal said that they felt safe as an assistant principal because the principal “still took full responsibility for everything at the bottom line.”

Of the 17 assistant principals that responded to the survey, five had been an assistant principal for 1-3 years, eight 4-7 years, and four 8 or more years. Additionally, nine of the assistant principals currently serve in high schools, six serve in middle schools, and two serve in elementary schools. To the question, “Do you want to be a principal?” eleven responded “yes,” five responded “maybe,” and one responded “no.” The assistant principal that responded “no” was a high school assistant principal, and the assistant principals that responded “maybe” were three high school and two middle school assistant principals. The assistant principal that does not want to be a principal responded that from their perspective, “the assistant principal position allows for an opportunity to develop the vision and further the message in ways a principal could not. I also have a great deal of autonomy in my AP position. I might feel differently in a different setting.”

One of the participants who responded that “maybe” they would like to be a principal wrote that they would in a smaller district but not in their current district because that district “will suck your time.” Another of the “maybe” respondents said that they got into administration with the idea of being a principal but that “the thought of it now doesn’t bring a spark of joy/energy/passion like it once did.” A different “maybe” respondent wrote that they “consider

going back to the classroom” but they would “consider a principalship at the right school for [them].” The next maybe respondent wrote that they:

Love their current job and collaborating with colleagues in order to make the best school possible and impact kids to the highest degree we can. Being a principal rather than an assistant principal naturally comes with additional weight, and potentially also complicates what semblance of a work-life balance I currently have.

The final “maybe” respondent said, “The overwhelming stress of this job and all that is asked of us at times feels like too much. I can't imagine having even more responsibility. And then adding on to that even fewer days off makes that job less attractive.”

Of the 11 participants that said they would like to be a principal, four of them noted greater influence or impact as the reason they want to be a principal. Five of the “yes” respondents did not provide an answer to the question, and two said they can see themselves doing it once they gain more experience as an assistant principal.

Considering all of this, the participants identified many things that the district can improve to create a robust principal pipeline. Three central office administrators shared their concern for the pathway to become a principal in the district as being an instructional mentor or behavior specialist. One of them shared, “The skills to be a great coach are not the only training grounds for being a great leader.” This targeted focus might be leading to bias in who is becoming a principal. This same central office administrator said, “I do think there’s some inadvertent bias baked into not just ours, but a lot of pathways.” To help remedy this problem, they pointed to a system where staff that are thinking about becoming administrators can shadow an administrator to see what the work looks like without changing their role. This would allow them to show their interest in leadership in a safe way and without having to be selected by a

supervisor to do so. Another central office administrator talked about the need to “build out instructional models that make the most effective way to be a principal more observable and concrete for people interested” in becoming a principal. A different central office administrator said, “I think opportunities to give people that aren’t administrators more opportunities to actually be in the role as they’re moving forward, actually live in the discipline office for a period of time, to be in front of staff” would be helpful in building a principal pipeline.

A need for clarity around the expectations of an effective principal also arose from the participants’ responses. One central office administrator pointed to this lack of clarity: “I think lack of a leadership framework is hurting us. I think we need something to give feedback around.” Currently this central office administrator shared that when they talk to staff or assistant principals that want to become principals, there is nothing to clearly point to an area of leadership that they need to develop. Another central office administrator spoke to the current challenge of knowing the principal readiness of the assistant principals to move to principal roles because of the district’s size and lack of clarity around the skills needed to become a principal: “I don’t know that I can say one for one that these are the ones that I know have all those strengths.” This same central office administrator spoke to this lack of clarity in the district’s current evaluation tool for assistant principals: “I don’t think I would look at an AP individual evaluation and say, ‘Oh, yeah, this person is ready because of this evaluation.’”

There was a belief shared by central office administrators that “growing your own” is important but it was also shared that the district should also find a way to attract candidates from other districts. One central office administrator spoke to the importance of developing internal candidates like the district does to develop classified staff (mostly instructional assistants) into licensed teachers. This administrator pointed to a district in Texas that a group of the district’s

staff visited to learn about the Texas district's leadership development. This district, the administrator shared, "rarely hire[s] from outside of their district," which led to a culture in that district that "just felt so good" because of the "level of pride that was there." Conversely, three other central office administrators pointed to the need to hire leaders from outside of the district. One central office administrator said, "Building a pipeline is also bringing in leaders who have experience outside, who can then bring innovative ideas that can really round out district leadership, so it's not so insular. Two central office administrators also noted that at the secondary level there are few candidates for principal jobs. One of those central office administrators shared "there's not enough people seeking the job," which has made hiring difficult.

When assistant principals responded to the survey question: "How well did your administrator licensure program prepare you to become a principal," 16 of the 17 participants responded to the question. The scale they responded to was one to five with one being "not well" and five being "very well." Of the 16 participants responding, five assigned a four to this question and seven assigned a three, three assigned a two, and one assigned a one. Themes in strengths of programs included multi-level experience and connection to the applied district's staff and peers. Weaknesses in programs included lack of practical application to current work. One participant wrote that a weakness was "not having a student teaching type experience where you take over for a few weeks to really get a feel for what it's like." Another participant shared that "some of the actual assignments seemed forced or shadow versions of the work that actually happens in schools." A different participant wrote, "I really appreciated having current [district central office] teach one of the classes." Similarly, one participant described it as a weakness to be "the only one in my classes that lived in [applied district]." Another participant said a

weakness was that their program “didn’t align with the school district.” One participant said, “From a philosophical standpoint, I felt very prepared, but in terms of any real/practical and applicable knowledge I just had to jump in.”

These themes around the lack of practicality of university administrator preparation programs were also produced by the principals who participated in this study. One of the principals said, “I wish that I had gotten more varied experiences like going into the classrooms together and learning about how that person thinks and evaluates instruction.” Another principal said, “I liked the tie to [applied district].” Another principal described the lack of practical application: “It was helpful because I would know some of the mechanics. What it didn’t help me with is to know how all of those are connected.” One principal talked about the importance of going through scenarios in their program: “It was helpful to think through real-life problems with support, so that it’s not a crazy jump to a different scenario.” One principal said:

I felt fairly well prepared. I don’t think any program could prepare you for every eventuality but it felt like it did a good job giving me context and then helping me realize you just have to know who to call to check on things or using your resources wisely. So, I felt like I was pretty well-prepared. Maybe not of the boots on the ground things. That was more being in a building, but for the big picture pieces.

The central office participants discussed a new endeavor they are working on, which is to connect their Aspiring Administrators cohort to a local university administrator preparation program because they have seen that as a need. One central office administrator shared her excitement for the program: “I am super interested in how we can shape the curricular content and the educational experience of future administrators maybe in ways that are more effective than we have seen historically.” Another central office administrator spoke to how this type of

connection to the university will formalize the district's principal pipeline. There was a hope shared that this tie to the university will help the district formalize how it identifies and develops future principals.

**Sub Question: What are the applied district's current practices to develop the skills and responsibilities of effective principals in newly hired principals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices.**

A few themes emerged around this sub question: What are the applied district's current practices to develop the skills and responsibilities of effective principals in newly hired principals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices? These themes are as follows:

- Lack of clarity around the skills and responsibilities of the role hinders principal development.
- Principal mentors are valued but have been applied inconsistently.
- Collaborating with other principals is valued support.
- Level directors are supportive but do not provide enough support.

A theme that emerged from the participants was that the district lacks clarity around the skills and responsibilities of the principal role that it is important for principals to have. Nine of the 35 participants discussed this specifically. One central office administrator said, "We don't do as good a job as I think we can about helping principals say, 'These are the things we're going to focus on, and these are the things we're to measure so you get better.' Instead we say, 'Take care of everything.'" This same central office administrator added that this sense of clarification also needs to include what principals get to decide and what central office gets to decide.

Another central office administrator spoke to this need to clarify the steps to move through the

system from instructional assistant, teacher, principal, central office administrator, etc. They said we need a system “because we can create these pathways where we say to them, ‘We’re going to carry you through your whole career if you want.’” Another central office administrator pointed out that clarity of routines would be helpful like “those routines and structures and expectations for kids and staff.” Being clear with those, they shared, would help principals be successful.

Principals and assistant principals also pointed to this need for clarity of expectations and responsibilities. One principal said, “I think just being clear on the systems that are non-negotiable to our district” would be helpful. Another principal talked about the need to understand what the job will look like or what they are “signing up for.”

An assistant principal brought up how they appreciated when the district used the McREL leadership framework for training. They said, “I found this super helpful as a beginning administrator.” Another assistant principal wrote that it would be nice to have a “new administrator handbook/checklist for each month.” Again, reiterating the need for clear expectations. Another assistant principal talked about the need for “clarity and cohesion” and compared building leaders to what effective teaching looks like around clarity and then continuous feedback on the expected skills or knowledge. This lack of clarity and the appropriate support for learning is also something that one assistant principal pointed out as leading to principals who are not successful. They said, “We need to truly support those who are in leadership roles and struggling, rather than simply moving them to another building.”

Regarding different support needed, participants discussed strengths and weaknesses of current systems. Different levels have provided different types of support. A few years ago elementary and secondary had a full-time retired principal supporting new principals. For the last two years, elementary assigned a current, seasoned principal as a mentor to new principals while

middle and high have retained a retired principal to mentor new administrators (assistant principals and principals). A couple of principals noted problems with having current principals act as mentors for new principals. A principal said that it is hard to have a mentor that is a current colleague because they “all get busy.” Furthermore, another principal said a problem with having a colleague as a mentor is that when they need a quick response that mentor is not available because they are busy running their own building.

That said, six of the nine principals said they valued the time with other principals to problem-solve and think through their work. One principal said, “My thing is about relationships with the people and knowing who I go to.” One principal talked about the cohort of principals that met with the retired mentor: “It was a small group, so it felt very supportive.” Another principal said, “I have a lot of connections with other principals in the district that I can also call for specific scenarios.” One principal pointed out how critical getting to know other principals is for all of them but especially principals who come from out of district because they said of their experience collaborating with other principals: “That is where I’ve gotten a lot of ideas.” This need to collaborate with other principals was important but not as important for principals that have come up through the district. One principal said, “Just the fact that I’ve been in [the district] for so long that I have established relationships” helps them navigate the large district. This includes a relationship with the former principal of their building, and two of the principals mentioned their predecessors as critical mentors in their new roles. Three of the assistant principals also called out the need for collaboration with colleagues as supportive. Two of the three mentioned “organized peer learning” and “time to visit other schools and build relationships among admin” as important to supporting principals.

Many of the participants pointed to improvements that central office can make to improve support for principals. One central office administrator noted that the district has about “75% of administrators in their first three years” and this central office administrator also noted the fragility of the principals when they talked to them individually. This administrator said, “I wonder if we are somehow underestimating just the amount of ongoing support that all leaders need to do this really hard job.” Another central office administrator shared that we need to get better at supporting principals because “we don’t have enough people.” This administrator went on to share that they have had principal candidate pools with two applicants. One central office administrator said that “we don’t do enough” to support our principals, and that the district has not been consistent in what they provide support for principals. Another central office administrator shared, that they “feel like leaders want to be in a system that honors them and [ . . . ] they know they’re supported because of all of the ways we have designed the system to do that.” A principal suggested that “district people come in and check in with principals” to see what they need so principals know that others support them. Finally, three of the assistant principals pointed to the need to ensure principals have the resources they need to do their jobs, like the appropriate amount of staff, a high functioning administrative team for those schools with assistant principals, and then to think about how we relieve the stress of principals—perhaps by looking closely at their time, especially in the summer and allowing more remote work.

Other strategies that emerged that the central office could do to support principals is to give them more autonomy and get their input before placing them into a school to ensure they are ready for it. One principal said: “I think having us being part of the process really does empower us when we’re placed somewhere, knowing this is part of what I chose.” Another

principal said that central office can support by sharing district plans early, so they can plan for their buildings and give principals “a bit more autonomy within and individual building.” This suggestion coincides with a central office administrator’s thought that the district needs “principal input at the superintendent level.” Furthermore, it was also suggested that the central office needs to prioritize principal pipeline and principal support work, and one way to do that is to appoint someone to create the learning pathways and support systems for principals; however, the district, according to one central office administrator, has a person this year doing that work but will not have a person leading the work next year. The work will fall to the level directors and deputy superintendents.

Moreover, the role of the elementary, middle, and high school level directors came up through participant responses as one support system for principals. Six of the 35 participants brought them up as support for principals. One central office administrator shared that level directors “get to know our principals really well. And [they’re] on call 24/7. And, still it’s like they need more or some need more.” One principal said, “My level director is amazing. I can call [them] anytime.” Yet, one central office administrator noted that level directors are “stretched so thin, [they] can’t do the coaching and the mentorship every day.”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Summary**

Although this study did not investigate all the aspects of principal succession planning and only focused on identifying those aspects related to developing future principals as well as developing and supporting principals new to their role, it did identify some strengths and opportunities for the studied school district and possibly others as they think through and develop their principal succession plans. The studied school district of about 42,000 students in Oregon's Willamette Valley has identified a need to improve student outcomes for all students, and especially for the growing population of non-white students. To do that, this district has a strategic plan that depends upon effective principals implementing strategies within their schools that will result in the district realizing the goals set-forth in their strategic planning.

Hiring and retaining effective principals is a problem throughout the nation and is also a problem within the studied school district. Bryant et al. (2017) point to the principal vacancy rate in the United States as a principal short fall that is caused because districts do not have candidates with the right skills, and teachers lack motivation to become administrators. For the studied district, one central office administrator said that the district has about "75% of administrators in their first three years" and another central office administrator shared "there's not enough people seeking the job," which has made hiring difficult. This district has a principal succession planning concern that needs to be addressed to ensure that effective principals are always at the helm of each of its schools.

The findings of this study reveal that the applied school district has many aspects of principal succession planning in place and has many opportunities to improve their principal

succession planning practices. When looking at each sub-question, one will find opportunities for this district and possibly other school districts to adjust their principal succession planning practices.

**Sub Question: What are the applied district’s identified responsibilities and skills of an effective principal?**

To have effective principals, which is the centerpiece of principal succession planning, the applied district needs to identify what it means to be an effective principal. It is hard to identify and develop the skills and responsibilities of a future principal if a district does not know what those skills and responsibilities are. From the interviews with central office administrators and principals new to their roles, as well as from survey responses from assistant principals, 12 important skills or responsibilities of an effective principal rose to the top of the responses to questions designed to solicit responses to this. Those skills and responsibilities were as follows:

- Visionary
- Instructional leader
- Communicative
- Collaborator
- Manager
- Emotionally intelligent
- Adaptable
- Student-centered
- Learner
- Decision-maker
- Data informed

- Culture-builder

Of these 12 skills or responsibilities, the researcher believes that eight are central and four are embedded within the eight central responsibilities or skills. The eight central skills or responsibilities are as follows:

- Visionary
- Instructional leader
- Manager
- Emotionally intelligent
- Student-centered
- Decision-maker
- Data informed
- Culture-builder

The four skills or responsibilities that are embedded within the eight central skills and responsibilities are

- Communicative
- Collaborator
- Adaptable
- Learner

What follows is a focused look into the eight central identified skills and responsibilities of effective principals and how the four other responsibilities and skills are embedded within those.

## **Visionary**

What is notable about these identified skills and responsibilities is that they all in some form tie back to being a visionary leader, and all these responsibilities or skills are connected in some way. For example, it is hard to be an adaptable principal and sound decision-maker without being a good communicator, collaborator, etc. Specific to being a visionary principal, it is important to see that for a principal to set a vision and get their staff, students, and families behind that vision to realize it, they need to have all the other responsibilities and skills. This is demonstrated in the research of Alanoglu and Karabatak (2021) who assert that for schools to improve outcomes for students they need leaders who get staff behind a shared vision, support them, and lead staff through learning and improving their practices for students. This is also the premise of Fullan's (2002) work where he describes Cultural Change Principals (CCPs). He asserts that CCPs know how to implement change and have the emotional intelligence to develop shared leadership to improve student achievement.

## **Instructional Leader**

Another skill or responsibility identified from the participants was having strength as an instructional leader, and interestingly six of the nine principals highlighted their teaching experience before becoming administrators, and all those principals had at least eight years of experience in the classroom. The research by Liebowitz and Porter (2022) found that principals who were effective teachers prior to becoming principals were more effective at improving student achievement as principals and note that "there may be value in recruiting more effective teachers in the principalship" (Liebowitz & Porter, 2022, p.12). They also note that they believe that it is important that the instructional practices of the leader should be developed and nurtured as a leader of instruction in their buildings. Furthermore, Grissom et al. (2020) conclude that

years of experience and formal education did not predict effectiveness of principals, but higher performance ratings in their previous roles such as teacher or assistant principal do lead to a more effective principal.

### **Manager**

Being an effective manager was another skill or responsibility that participants identified as important. This is a skill or responsibility that might not be easily seen in an effective teacher, but the district needs to find a way to identify this skill in future principals and develop it in current principals. Gentilucci et al. (2013) assert that principals need support with managerial skills, and they note that in many school districts, principals are left to their own to find support with those skills; therefore, Gentilucci, et al. (2013) recommend that school districts and principal preparation programs, principal supervisors, and mentors provide instruction and support in soft and hard skills, so principals can successfully navigate the complexities of their roles. The participants described technical skills in this category such as budget and human resources knowledge and skills as well as organizational skills to create order in their buildings and their personal and professional lives. This ability to organize people and ideas to create systems was also connected to creating a calm and supportive culture in their building, which was also connected to being collaborative. A good manager was described as knowing how to delegate responsibilities and manage the work of others without being a “micro-manager.” Being a good manager was also described as having good follow-through skills, which takes someone who is organized and communicative to “do what you say you’re going to do,” as one principal described.

## **Student-Centered and Equity Driven**

Another important, and likely more obvious responsibility that was identified as important by participants, is being student-centered and equity driven. For the district to realize their vision of “all students graduate prepared for a successful life,” all students must be seen for their assets and the district’s schools must be led by people that have the courage to confront inequities and take actionable steps to improve systems to ensure all students can flourish in school and “graduate prepared for a successful life.” This also takes a leader who is culturally competent as described by a principal either because they are from the students’ cultures, or they have learned about the students’ cultures. This district has done equity training with administrators and all staff in the past. They have adopted an equity lens for decision-making, and they have named equity at the center of their strategic plan. Having leaders with this responsibility is critical for the district to meet its strategic planning goals.

## **Decision-Maker**

Being a good decision decision-maker was another skill or responsibility that was identified by participants as important. This is a responsibility that at first glance might seem like it should not have to be called out, but the participants called attention to it. This idea that principals need to make quick decisions sometimes, and at other times they can slow down and include others in their decision-making process was clear from the participants. Principals are constantly making decisions and all of them impact their schools. Sometimes big decisions like for safety require a principal to make a quick decision that has a significant impact on the people inside the building. Other decisions, such as whom to invite to a meeting or how to lay out a strategy do not need quick responses but do need effective responses. One principal described

making decisions like “a chess player” as hard and this is something that the research has perhaps not highlighted enough.

### **Data Informed**

Being data informed was another responsibility that was seen as important for principals to use to make good decisions that lead to improved outcomes for students as seen in student achievement data. Data was discussed by central administrators as a way to measure the effectiveness of a principal and as a way for principals to “monitor [. . .] their own work” and “make course corrections as needed.” This ability to use data to monitor progress toward goals and make decisions to change tactics as needed is a skill that participants pointed out as important. The idea of being “data informed, and data driven,” as described by one principal also points to being student-centered and equity driven. A principal who looks at their student achievement data through an equity lens and uses that data to make decisions and change strategies to revise or rebuke inequitable systems will help the principal meet the needs of all students.

### **Emotionally Intelligent**

The responsibility of having emotional intelligence encompasses many skills and responsibilities and specific skills related to collaboration and communication, as other skills that have been identified do. Being emotionally intelligent was described by one central office administrator as having the “personal connection and touch to move people.” Principals with strong emotional intelligence relate to their staff, students, and families. They understand what people need from them and have the skills to build trusting relationships that lead to people following them. Another central office administrator described a principal with these skills as “someone who understands people and how to be an empathetic listener but also understands

how to move people forward.” These are the “soft skills” that Fullan (2002) refers to when he describes Cultural Change Principals.

### **Culture-Builder**

This idea of being a Cultural Change Principal presented by Fullan (2002) also came through from the participants as a principal who is a culture-builder. This culminating skill or responsibility identified in this study describes someone who creates a positive culture in their building. A positive school culture has a clear vision and staff that work toward that vision because their principal collaborated, adapted, built relationships, etc. to get the staff, students, and families behind that vision. This principal creates a culture where, as a central office administrator described seeing and hearing “patterns and good stories” and has “somebody there helping lead the magic.” The description of culture as magic shows the nuance of being a culture-builder. There is not one skill or responsibility to develop in a principal to help them build a positive culture in their building; rather it is all those responsibilities and skills in one package.

### **What are the applied district’s current principal pipeline practices? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices?**

The robust study by Goldring et al. (2023) has thorough recommendations for districts to consider when they strategize how to build their principal pipeline, and the applied district should consider these recommendations as they look at what this study revealed as strengths and weaknesses within their current principal pipeline practices. Goldring et al. (2023) recommend the following for districts to consider when building effective principal pipeline practices:

- Consider pipelines from multiple types of leadership roles to move beyond the principal as the key leader.

- Pipeline work needs to be aligned to district goals. There is not a one-size fits-all approach.
- Ground the work in standards that constantly evolve to ensure they are still in-line with district goals and values, such as including standards around being equity-centered.
- Pipelines are critical to diversifying school leadership and they should be approached as such.
- Districts need a core team of leaders to oversee this work.
- This work should span across multiple departments in a district. For example, human resources should participate with principal supervisors.
- Districts need a “champion” to ensure pipelines are a priority and aligned to district goals.
- Districts should partner with universities and other outside leadership development organizations to strengthen their pipeline.
- Seek the help of current principals to develop the pipeline to understand the work of principals better.

Centering the guidance from the Goldring et al. (2023) study highlights the findings discussed in this section regarding the strengths and weaknesses in the applied district’s principal pipeline practices.

### **Teacher Leadership**

The participants pointed to some formal and informal principal pipeline practices that the district uses to identify and develop future principals. The first practice identified is developing teacher leaders. The district does not have a formal system to develop teacher leaders in the

school building. What they have had are informal but clearly known pathways for teacher leaders to be tapped as future principals. That is the role of behavior specialist and instructional mentor or more commonly known as instructional coach in districts outside of the studied district. These roles were seen as both positive and negative, and of the two roles, the instructional mentor role, was seen as the most common pathway to a principalship in the district. One Central Office administrator described these roles as “key” to their principal pipeline while another central office administrator described these roles as gatekeepers to becoming a principal. Six of the nine principals interviewed talked about their time as teacher leaders, and five of those principals identified that role as an instructional mentor in the district. Because this teacher leader role is a known pathway to a principalship, it was also pointed out by participants that the district is likely missing out on strong and potentially more diverse candidates because there are teachers who might like leadership roles but do not want to step away from the classroom yet or have a formal title besides teacher. It was suggested by two central office administrators that the district develop a process for staff to show their interest another way, such as having a program where interested staff can shadow a principal or do a small internship where they spend some time doing principal work (running the discipline office, meeting with parents, leading a team, giving observational feedback to teachers, etc.). As Goldring et al. (2023) point out, it is important that the district look at opening their teacher leadership pathways to allow more candidates because this is critical work to diversify leadership within the district.

### **Aspiring Administrators**

Once teacher leaders, primarily instructional mentors or behavior specialists, have begun or finished an administrator licensure program, the district has a formalized pathway to develop teacher leaders as principals. This is called the Aspiring Administrator program in the district.

The Aspiring Administrator program had been part of the district for many years in different forms. Prior to the 2023-24 school year, the program was run by retired administrators who were serving as mentors. This year a central office administrator in human resources is planning the programming with one of the deputy superintendents, and the level directors are leading the monthly sessions. For this year and the most recent years, staff that already have or are obtaining their administrative license apply for this program and are interviewed. The level directors, the administrators directly responsible for hiring principals, have had varying degrees of involvement in the vetting process of the selected participants in the program. The participants in this study highlighted many strengths and weaknesses of this program. Weaknesses include the lack of diversity of participants pointing to the “mostly white women” participating according to one central office administrator. The effectiveness of this program was also questioned because the district has not hired many of the candidates, according to another central office administrator. The content of the program was also questioned. One central office administrator discussed that the focus on technical skills such as budget and human resources tasks needed to change to more developing “habits of mind” such as emotional intelligence skills.

That said, the only possible weakness the school principals and assistant principals pointed to in Aspiring Administrators was that it felt competitive. This, however, was only noted by one participant, and this participant also recognized that this program would naturally be competitive because all the participants would be competing for a limited number of administrative positions. Otherwise, principals and assistant principals liked the program and discussed how it helped them connect with colleagues and central office staff. One principal said that moving into the principal role from an assistant principal role was easier because she had been part of the Aspiring Administrators. They called the program “the magic” that made the

transition smooth “because that makes you so involved in district decision-making departments.” The “facetime” with departments that was part of Aspiring Administrators was highly valued as shared by another principal. They did not share the concerns that the central office administrators had about the program.

### **Assistant Principals**

In addition to teacher leader roles and the Aspiring Administrators program, assistant principals are a critical piece in the principal pipeline, and this district has not systematically developed the skills of assistant principals to become principals. Assistant principals shared that they felt unseen and not recognized by central office administrators. Assistant principals also shared that their lack of clarity of what skills they need to be developing is problematic. They shared that they want to know what they need to work on to become a principal, and they had not received that specific feedback other than from going through the interview process and not being selected for the job, as one assistant principal shared. Furthermore, there was a sense of discontent from assistant principals about the lack of clarity regarding performance strengths and weaknesses as well, due to lack of communication with central office staff. On the other hand, principals shared how they intentionally work to develop their assistant principals into principals.

Assistant principals did, however, discuss the learning opportunities they appreciate through collaborating with other assistant principals when they met as a cohort and through district leadership meetings. Similarly, one assistant principal shared appreciation for the learning they got from meeting as their school administrator team where the principal created a space for them to bring a problem of practice that they all think through. These findings are important and highlight the importance of the study completed by Hayes and Burkett (2021).

Their study of assistant principals showed the importance of professional development, networking with colleagues and district leaders, and mentoring for assistant principals.

### **Principals' Role with Assistant Principal Development**

All principals in this study did see themselves as having responsibility for the learning of their assistant principals. Some principals were more intentional than others about doing this. Central office administrators also shared the importance of principals developing assistant principals. One central office administrator shared that “the most important person in those AP lives for career development” is going to be the principal. Yet, no system or training was identified for how principals are to do that. One principal shared how he meets with his assistant principals at the beginning of the school year to identify what their goals are for the year and then follows-up with them through individual meetings every other week. Another principal discussed meeting with each of their assistant principals once a month, and another described intentional modeling for assistant principals and creating well-rounded experiences for them to learn the many facets of leading a school. All these strategies plus the understanding that creating a safe space for assistant principals to take risks and learn demonstrates principal thoughtfulness in developing their assistant principals, but this was all by happenstance. These principals have developed their own systems for nurturing the development of their assistant principals into principals, but it is not systematic nor aligned to standards or a leadership framework, as recommended by the study of Goldring et al. (2023). Moreover, of the four level directors interviewed, only one of them spoke to working with principals on developing their assistant principals.

## **Assistant Principals Lack of Desire to Become Principals**

Another weakness of the district's principal pipeline is the assistant principals' eagerness or lack thereof to become principals. Of the 17 assistant principals that participated in this study, not all of them demonstrated a clear desire to become principals. Four assistant principals said "maybe," and one said "no" they do not want to become principals. These responses might make one wonder if the principals have had a change of heart since they have become assistant principals, but this study did not ask if the assistant principals wanted to become principals when they were hired as assistant principals. One assistant principal demonstrated their discontent with the district support of assistant principals and principals. They wrote:

Minimal effort is put into developing leaders, either at the AP or Principal level. As a result, we wear out and lose good leaders, without ever even having clearly articulated the leadership skills the district was looking for in the first place, let alone developed them as people and as leaders.

Certainly, there is cause to believe that this district has not provided the support to assistant principals to help them feel valued nor seen as the next principals in the district.

## **Growing Their Own Principals**

In general, central office administrators shared that growing their own principals was important but a couple of them also saw the importance of hiring principals from outside of the district. Since identifying future principals within and outside of the district is possible, it is important to see how effective university administrator license programs have been to know what the district might do to influence those programs, so effective principals are easily available from inside and outside the district. The overall feedback from assistant principals and principals was that the programs they attended were good for theory but not good for application. Most

participants felt that the programs did not prepare them for the daily work of a school administrator let alone a principal. One assistant principal described wishing their program had a “student teaching type experience” to learn more practical application of theory before stepping into the official role of school assistant principal or principal.

Central office administration, however, shared their excitement at beginning a partnership with a local university where they are designing and teaching the courses for district staff who might also be identified as part of their Aspiring Administrator cohort. The district is planning to marry an administrator licensure program to their Aspiring Administrator cohort to in-turn have a principal pipeline that is more robust and prepared for the work in the district. The district’s alignment to an administrator licensure program at a local university is in alignment with the recommendations of Goldring et al. (2023).

In addition to district alignment with a university administrator licensure program as Goldring et al. (2023) recommend, it is also important that district leadership teach the courses at the university. In their study, Zepeda et al. (2011) point to the importance of district leaders teaching the courses for their future principals. They also found that leadership training embedded in leadership standards, as Goldring et al. (2023) also recommend was seen by the districts in the Zepeda et al. (2011) study as more intentional and leading to better outcomes for their leaders. This research by both Goldring et al. (2023) and Zepeda et al. (2011) is important to the applied district because this is the model they are following. They will have central office administrators teaching the administrator licensure courses at the partnering university, and all that course work is aligned to state and national standards for principals.

**What are the applied district’s current practices to develop the skills and responsibilities of effective principals in newly hired principals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those practices.**

Once the pipeline of principals has done its job and new principals are placed into buildings the study participants identified inconsistent practices in developing the skills and responsibilities of those principals new to their role, specifically for this study within their first three years in their current principal role. The first problem that was identified for principals is a problem that was also identified for the development of assistant principals and teacher leaders: the district lacks clarity around the specific skills and responsibilities that they want their principals to have. This lack of clarity has led to frustration from assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators and a lack of intentional development of the skills the district wants its principals to have for them to be effective. Currently the district lacks a leadership framework, which was pointed out by participants, as a source of frustration. One assistant principal shared how the district’s past practice of training administrators on the McREL leadership framework was helpful. Other participants just spoke to the lack of clarity and suggested a checklist of skills. They also pointed out that the current evaluation tool that the district uses with administrators does not identify the specific skills or responsibilities well enough to give specific feedback and support to principals even though it is aligned to state standards for administrators. One assistant principal described how the district needs to “truly support those who are in leadership roles and struggling, rather than simply moving them to another building.” The district has leaders who are struggling, and they are not given the specifics of their deficiencies nor enough support to improve those.

Additionally, the district has applied varying strategies to support new principals in developing their skills through mentoring. At one point the district had two retired administrators who were full-time mentors providing support—one for elementary and one for secondary principals. Currently, the elementary and secondary levels approach mentoring of principals differently. The elementary level no longer has a full-time mentor for principals. They have asked seasoned principals to mentor new principals. In this model the new principals and the seasoned principals meet formally as a group once a month, and each pairing is supposed to check-in at least weekly. The seasoned principals receive a small stipend for their extra time.

Middle and high school principals are still supported by a full-time mentor. The mentor is meeting weekly or bi-weekly with new middle school principals, but the high school principals did not share a consistency with meeting with the mentor. The middle school principals reflected more appreciation for this model than the high school principals interviewed. The high school principals spoke of other support such as other mentors and predecessor principals supporting their work. The middle school principals talked more positively about their mentor. The elementary principals appreciated their mentors but also pointed out that because they are full-time principals they are not as available as they feel that they need for adequate support. Elementary principals also pointed out that there was a lack of accountability for the mentee/mentor to spend time together like the expectation was established. As Bauer et al. (2019) found in their study, mentors contacting their mentees regularly can help lessen the impacts of isolation and stress that principals feel to meet the demands of their job. Moreover, the guidance from Celoria and Roberson (2015) regarding what support should look like through a mentor should be considered: principals need a safe space away from their evaluator to work through the problem-solving they must do day in and day out, which requires them to apply the

responsibilities and skills identified earlier of effective principals. The district has demonstrated that mentoring is important by continuing it in a form of some sort for principals, but it has inconsistent application between the levels with varying degrees of identified value by the new principals.

That said, collaboration with other principals was important to the principal participants because they valued learning from their peers and feeling support from them. They spoke of the opportunity to learn from each other and problem-solve as valued for the short-term and valued for contributing to the development of long-term relationships. Building relationships with each other helped principals feel supported and helped them “navigate the district,” as one principal shared. Principals valued the opportunity to support each other, and the participants appreciated formalized opportunities to connect at meetings. This ability to connect in formal spaces helped them reach out to each other to problem-solve and support as needed informally because the formalized setting helped them build trusting relationships with each other.

Additionally, central office administrators noted that the current support principals get from their level directors and mentors does not seem to be enough. One central office administrator said, “I wonder if we are somehow underestimating just the amount of ongoing support that all leaders need to do this really hard job.” The district has an understanding that their principals need more or different support than what they are currently given.

Findings from this study highlight that the studied district has current strengths and is heading in the right direction to build upon those strengths in their principal succession planning practices. For example, they have a program for aspiring administrators, called Aspiring Administrators, that will be aligned to a newly formed administrator licensure program at a partner university with coursework aligned to state and national standards and courses taught by

the applied district's central leadership. Another strength is that the applied district has also been mentoring new principals.

That said, there are many facets of principal succession planning that were identified as weaknesses and are areas for the district to consider improving. One critical piece of principal succession planning to consider for improvement is around identifying the desired skills and responsibilities of effective principals, building a framework around those identified skills and responsibilities, and providing clear support to both future and current principals around their development of those skills. Another area to consider for improvement is in how they identify or "tap" teacher leaders to become the next principals, and the next big area to consider for improvement is in how the applied district supports assistant principals and principals new to their positions.

### **Implications of Findings**

Based on this study and the research on principal succession planning, there are some actionable steps this district can do to improve its principal succession planning practices around identifying and developing future principals and supporting principals new to their roles.

#### **Create Clarity around Desired Principal Skills and Responsibilities**

The district should consider taking the identified skills and responsibilities of effective principals from this study to develop a leadership framework for the district. Once this framework is developed the district should align their professional development, evaluative feedback, and mentor support for administrators and aspiring administrators to that framework. This will provide greater clarity on the district's desired skills and responsibilities of effective principals. Clarity of these skills and responsibilities will help the district identify future

principals, support their development, and support the development of current principals through specific feedback and clear expectations.

### **Increase Teacher Pathways to Principalship**

The current pathway from a teacher to a principal is not broad or accessible enough for many staff and perhaps leading to a lack of diverse candidates in the district's principal pipeline. This district should consider creating a formalized way for an employee to raise their hand and show interest in learning about the role of principal without stepping out of the classroom to become an instructional mentor or behavior specialist. This could be a few days of release from the classroom or other school-based responsibilities to shadow a principal and do some of the work, such as classroom observation and feedback, student discipline, and running parent meetings. Being an instructional mentor or behavior specialist should not be the gatekeeper to becoming a principal. The district should create other leadership development opportunities and a safe way for employees to show their interest in becoming a principal.

Another consideration for the district is based on the studies of Liebowitz & Porter (2022) and Grissom et al (2020). The study of Liebowitz & Porter (2022) showed that principals who were effective teachers were more effective principals, and the study of Grissom et al. (2020) found that effective principals were effective in their previous roles either as teachers or assistant principals. This leads to the suggestion that the district systematically track high performing teachers and assistant principals to know who to strategically invite into their principal development programs. Evaluation data could be part of that tracking and the district should explore other ways to identify those high performing teachers and assistant principals. This practice might help mitigate bias in who is tapped into teacher leader roles, Aspiring Administrators, and eventually hired into principal roles.

### **Align Aspiring Administrators to University Partner**

The district is already implementing a new administrator licensure program with a local university. The candidates have been vetted by the central office leadership and all the participants in the university's program are from the studied district. This is exciting work because it will allow the district to align its identified desired responsibilities and skills of an effective principal into the coursework while also creating collaborative experiences for this cohort of employees and an opportunity for central office administrators to get to know these prospective principal candidates. This is critical work for the district to continue.

### **Intentionally Support Assistant Principals**

Assistant principals do not systematically receive the feedback nor support they need to develop and become effective principals. Since building principals serve as the direct supervisors of assistant principals, it is critical to develop principals, so they can develop their assistant principals. This means having professional development and clear guidance for principals about how to develop the skills and responsibilities of effective principals in their assistant principals. Principals also need to be held accountable for doing this by their level directors, so this should be systematically part of level director site visits and evaluation of principals. Also, this district should consider creating meeting opportunities for assistant principals and including them in the meetings with principals as much as possible to develop their skills. Time to collaborate with peers and learn from seasoned principals is important in their development, and intentional collaboration is valued by assistant principals and should be systematized.

Finally, consider assigning a mentor to support assistant principals new to their roles. Assistant principals, like principals, would benefit from a non-evaluative mentor, and this would help share the responsibility of the principal to develop the skills and responsibilities of their

assistant principals. The district would also need to train the mentors in the expectations of the role and how to mentor. This work should be systematized to help with the lack of clarity that currently exists in the district.

### **Intentionally Support New Principals**

The district's lack of a systemized support structure for principals new to their roles has led to inconsistent support for principals. While the elementary model is helpful because working alongside a seasoned principal is valuable, this model has been inconsistently applied. Some mentors and mentees are meeting more frequently than others, and some mentees feel more supported than others. It is hard to give the time and attention to a new principal when, even as a seasoned principal, one is running their own building. Another consideration is to have seasoned principals mentor new principals, but intentionally carve out time for them to meet more frequently and hold them accountable to clear expectations for the mentoring. That said, participants showed the most favor toward the consistency of the full-time mentor model that the middle school level employs. Nonetheless, either through peers or with full-time mentors, the district's principals need consistent support that is grounded in developing the identified skills and responsibilities of effective principals. Like the mentors for assistant principals, mentors for principals need to be trained on the expectations of their role and how to do that. This will also lead to more consistency and clarity for principals.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the intentions of the studied district are sound. The central office leadership shows an interest in improving their principal succession planning practices and most principals and assistant principals show appreciation for working in the district. Effective principals are critical to district and school success, and as the studied district works to ensure effective

principals are leading every building, the findings from this study have the potential to improve their principal succession planning practices and ensure effective principals are always leading their schools.

### **Limitations**

Because the researcher is a supervisor of principals, they were aware of their influence over the principals and assistant principal and mindful to safeguard them from feeling coerced into participating in the case study. The researcher did not interview any principals that they directly supervise to mitigate any undue influence of the researcher's supervisory role. The central office administrators were either peers or supervisors of the researcher. For interviews with them, the researcher needed to ensure that they were respectful of their time, and they were fully aware of the researcher's intent to use this research to improve the systems in the studied school district. Other limitations of this study include the limited number of assistant principals responding to the survey (17 of 45), and the data analysis that was only completed by the researcher, which could have led to some unintentional bias in the data analysis and findings.

### **Future Research**

Principal effectiveness is an area of research that should continue to be studied. Measuring the success of a principal on student outcomes is certainly one measure of success, and from this research one sees that attributes such as being a culture-builder are also valued as part of being an effective principal. Further research is needed on how to measure such skills and responsibilities other than relying solely on student outcomes. There are many variables to student outcomes, and a principal at a lower performing school might be valued as more effective than a principal at a higher performing school if the identified skills and responsibilities are specifically measured.

This study did not collect data on hiring and principal placement practices within the studied district, but this is also an area that needs further study. The study would look at the alignment of the hiring practices to the identified skills and responsibilities of an effective principal, as well as how the district matches principals with building placement. Questions to consider:

- What are systems, people, needs within a building that indicate a best match for a particular principal placement?
- What are the questions or activities that should be part of the hiring process to ensure the district is hiring the most effective principal?

There is much more to research within this district regarding principal succession planning practices, but the findings from this study have the potential to improve practices within the applied district as well as for other school districts who are exploring how to improve their principal succession planning practices. All schools need effective principals at all times, and strong principal succession planning practices are critical to ensuring that happens.

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