

**Characteristics of Successful Principals in a Border Town**

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## **Abstract**

Numerous research reports on the characteristics of successful principals of high performing, high poverty urban schools have been conducted. Results indicate that principals tend to exhibit certain characteristics that researchers attribute to success. However, there is limited research on characteristics of principals of high performing, high poverty schools who work on the Texas-Mexican border. What strategies do principals on the Texas Mexican border use to make schools successful as measured by the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) ?

A 10-item questionnaire designed to identify successful border principal strategies for student success was sent to seventeen principals whose schools earned exemplary or recognized status on the Texas AEIS for two or three consecutive years in 1998 through 2000.

Results of the study indicated that principals of successful schools identified three essential keys to high performing schools including the collaborative development of a school vision and mission supporting high student achievement, continuous monitoring and adjusting instruction to meet the needs of students, and the creation of a positive school climate, a "family" campus atmosphere supportive of student success.

## **Introduction**

The principal is the most important factor affecting the success or failure of schools (Edmonds, 1979). Earning the title of "successful principal" in America today is no easy task. Principals must assume the roles of leader, facilitator, team builder, visionary, communicator, advocator, and moral agent. The principal must be knowledgeable in crisis management, community affairs, and social services. The position requires someone who can get things done for children through teaches, parents and community members while keeping the day to day operation of the school running smoothly (Adams, 1999; Blackman & Fenwick, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; O'Donnell, 1997).

## **Successful Principals Nationwide**

Good principals gather people around them who have high expectations of students and believe that all children can learn and succeed if barriers to learning are removed. These principals continually encourage teachers to do what is necessary to make children successful while safeguarding the learning environment from distractions, such as classroom interruptions and inflexible schedules. These leaders show flexibility in considering new ideas, strategies, and programs that help children succeed. They make average teachers excellent (Borsuk, 1999; Hopkins, 1999).

In a study of successful school principals, Keller (1998) found that principals of successful schools believe that curriculum and instruction are the

main business of the school. Principals communicated and enlisted support for student achievement from teachers, parents, students, and the community. They spent time observing and supporting classroom teachers and providing professional development for teachers as needed.

A meta-analysis of several studies (Bauer, 1997; Carter, 2000; Charles A. Dana Center 1999; Haberman, 1999; IDRA, 1997; Liber, 1999; Mortiner, et al., 1988; and Purkey & Smith, 1983) of high performing, high poverty schools revealed findings that all reports shared including:

- a shared vision and mission for the school and community;
- strong leadership committed to student success;
- caring and competent teachers;
- shared planning and decision making;
- a positive school climate;
- principal and teacher accountability for student success;
- high expectations and clear, measurable goals;
- budget focused on teacher development;
- a rigorous, integrated curriculum, especially in reading and math;
- an orderly and disciplined climate focused on instruction; and
- inclusion of parents in student learning.

### **Principals on The Texas Mexican Border**

Principals on the Texas-Mexican border provide educational services to students of high poverty who may be limited in English proficiency and are often recent immigrants. Like principals nationwide, principals on the border must develop effective strategies for improving student learning and achievement.

### **Students on the Texas-Mexican Border**

Schools on the Texas Mexican border are attended by a large majority of economically disadvantaged recent immigrant, and non-English speaking students. A large number of students are enrolled below grade level and have a 40% dropout rate compared to a 12.7% dropout rate for their White, non-Hispanic counterparts (Black, 1989). As a group, border students enter school later; leave school earlier, and are less likely to earn high school diplomas and college degrees (PACEE, 1996).

Many of the students in the Texas-Mexican border region are entering the United States for the first time (Martinez, 1994). Characteristics of Mexican immigrant students include the following: some have missed one or more years of school in Mexico, many speak only Spanish, many leave school early, and most immigrants are less likely to earn a high school diploma or pursue higher education (O'Donnell, 1997).

In a study of successful schools serving the poor and recent immigrants, Villarreal (2000) found that principals of successful schools:

- determine to succeed and make no excuses for anything less than success,
- use and teach English and the native language,
- capitalize on students' language and culture,
- use bilingualism as an asset,
- stay abreast of most recent knowledge of linguistic, cognitive and social development of English language learners, and
- do not allow issues such as poverty and violence to get in the way of student success.

Several schools in the Laredo districts have overcome the barriers of poverty, limited English proficiency, and special needs associated with recent immigrants and have reached exemplary or recognized status on the Texas AEIS reports for at least 1998-2000.

## **Methodology**

The descriptive study was approved by the Texas A & M International Institutional Review Board in March 2001. The 10-item questionnaire was field tested with students enrolled in the superintendency program at Texas A & M International during the spring semester 2001.

In April 2001, superintendents of the Laredo Independent School District and the United Independent School District gave permission to interview principals of high poverty, high performing schools receiving recognized and/or exemplary status for two or three years consecutively on the Texas AEIS reports for 1998-2000.

### Research Question

What strategies do border principals use to achieve high student performance as defined by the Texas AEIS reports for 1998-2000?

### Participants

Study participants included 17 principals in Laredo ISD and United ISD with schools receiving exemplary or recognized status as defined by the Texas Education Agency for at least the 1998-2000 school years. Principals were asked to complete and return a questionnaire to researchers by June 29, 2001. Thirteen of the 17 questionnaires were returned, representing a 76.5% return rate.



Participants had from six to 32 years of experience in the district and from one to 10 years of experience at the current school. Eight female and five male principals completed questionnaires.

The ethnicity of the group consisted of two White principals and 11 Hispanic principals. All of the participants had experience as a teacher and nine had experience as an assistant principal before promotion to principal.

During the 2000 school year, schools enrolled from 288 to 1900 students. Student ethnicity during 2000 ranged from 85.8% to 99.6% Hispanic, 0.3% to 10.4% White, and 0% to 1.2% Black. Student attendance rates ranged from 94.6% to 98.3% in May 2000. Schools ranged from 39.7% to 100% economically disadvantaged students. The mobility rate for students in the 2000 school year ranged from 8.9% to 32.8%. Questionnaire data from thirteen elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school were analyzed.

### **Study Results**

The study results included information derived from a 10-item questionnaire about how principals achieved exemplary or recognized status. The study questionnaire and answers follow.

Question #1: Rank the following items in order of importance in school success: school vision and mission, curriculum alignment, teacher expertise, teambuilding, parent involvement and shared decision-making. Respondents as

a group ranked the establishment of a school vision and mission as most important for school success.

Question #2: In your opinion, what is the most important factor influencing student success? Survey results indicated that high expectations for students and staff, a caring attitude by both principal and staff for the students' personal and academic achievement, and teachers skilled in teaching students with varying needs were the most important factors influencing student success.

Question #3: What practices do you use to increase student attendance or keep students in school? Student praise and incentives for high attendance were the most used methods of keeping students in school.

Question #4: How do you meet the needs of limited English proficient students? Participants indicated that students should be placed with a certified bilingual or English as a Second Language teacher skilled in diagnosing, monitoring, and teaching students with language needs.

Question #5: Please rank the following components in order of importance to school success: school climate, monitor student achievement, student discipline, staff development, allocation of resources, and consideration for cultural diversity. A positive school climate and consistent monitoring of student achievement were ranked as the most important practices for school success.

Question #6: How do you work with migrant students. Respondents indicated that students must have a certified bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher that worked with students one-on-one. Peer tutoring was also important to migrant student success.

Question #7: How do you and your staff meet the needs of students that enter your school with a history of low achievement? Respondents indicated that assessment of student needs, proper placement on academic learning level, and the use of programs designed to increase academic achievement were essential to assisting students with a history of low achievement.

Question #8: What do you and your staff do when you encounter teachers who do not share the high achievement mission of the school? Consistently, participants stated that campus principals and team leaders work with teachers to change negative attitudes. Teachers are involved in school activities and made to feel that the staff is a "family." If negative attitudes about expectations for student achievement do not change, the teacher is counseled to seek employment in another school.

Question #9: What do you look for when recruiting new teachers? Principals and team leaders look for experienced teachers willing to work hard to meet the learning needs of each student and seek training as needed.

Question #10: If you were to serve as a mentor for a new principal of a low-performing school in a high poverty area of South Texas who wants to make

that school high performing like your school, what basic suggestions would you recommend to start the new principal toward success? Respondents offered the following suggestions: set a vision and mission and sell that vision and mission to teachers, students and parents; know the students and their needs and monitor student achievement regularly; and celebrate teacher and student success.

### **Discussion**

Like all successful principals of high performing, high poverty schools, border principals believed that the establishment and belief in a common vision and mission for student success was essential. Continuous assessment of student progress and needs was essential to improving academic achievement of all students. Creating a "family" atmosphere on campus was essential to teacher and student motivation to achieve.

Future research on the leadership characteristics of border principals may include a study of the characteristics of high performing, high poverty schools in South Texas. A study of the importance of dual language for border principals and teachers is another area for future study.

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## **Appendix A**



## **Description and Definition of Terms**

A description and definition of terms provides clarity for work meanings and an explanation of terms as used in the study.

Definition of Terms. The following descriptions and definitions provide meaning for words and terms used in the study.

1. Hispanic - Hispanic individuals are those with origins in Spanish-speaking countries and cultures.
2. economically disadvantaged - Economically disadvantaged students are those who are reported as eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program or other public assistance.
3. high poverty - School with 38% to 100% of the students classified as economically disadvantaged are considered high poverty schools in this study.
4. high performing schools - Schools with exemplary or recognized status for at least two years as defined by the Texas Education Agency Accountability Manual.
5. attendance rate - The number of days students are in school attendance divided by the total number of days students are in membership for a school year.

6. accountability rating - An accountability rating refers to the rating received from the Texas Education Agency Division of Accountability on the Texas AEIS reports and include Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) results, attendance rates, mobility rates, student and teacher ethnicity, and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students served.
7. exemplary - According to the Texas Education Agency Accountability System at least 90.0% of students passing each subject areas on the TARS, a 1 % or less dropout rate for the previous year and at least 94% attendance rate for grades 1-12 for the previous year.
8. recognized - According to the Texas Education Agency accountability system The recognized rating applies to schools with at least 80.0% of students passing each subject area of the TARS, 3.5% or less of dropout rate for the previous year and at least 94.0% attendance in grades 1-12 for the previous year.

## **Appendix B**

## High Performing Questionnaire

### Participant Information:

- ❖ Years of experience in this district: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Positions held other than principal: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Years of experience as principals at the current school: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ School enrollment \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Participant Ethnicity: (Please check one) Anglo \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
Black \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Participant Gender: (Please check one.) Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions:

1. Rank the following items in order of importance in school's success:

\_\_\_\_\_ school vision and mission

\_\_\_\_\_ curriculum alignment

\_\_\_\_\_ parent involvement

\_\_\_\_\_ shared decision-making

\_\_\_\_\_ teacher expertise

\_\_\_\_\_ team building

2. In your opinion, what is the most important factor influencing student success?
3. What practices do you use to increase student attendance or keep students in school?
4. How do you meet the needs of limited English proficient students?
5. Please rank the following components in order of importance to school success.

(Rank from "1," important to "5," unimportant)

- \_\_\_\_\_ school climate
- \_\_\_\_\_ student discipline
- \_\_\_\_\_ consideration for cultural diversity
- \_\_\_\_\_ monitoring student achievement
- \_\_\_\_\_ allocation of resources
- \_\_\_\_\_ staff development

6. How do you work with immigrant students?
7. How do you and your staff meet the needs of students that enter your school with a history of low achievement?
8. What do you and your staff do when you encounter teachers who do not share the high achievement mission for the school?
9. What do you look for when recruiting new teachers?

10. If you were to serve as a mentor for a new principal of a low performing school in a high poverty area in South Texas who wants to make that school high performing like your school, what basic things would you recommend to start the new principal toward success?

## **Appendix C**

## Descriptive Statistics of Study Schools

No.	Level	Attend.	Eco. Dis.	Hispanic	White	Black	No. St.	Mobility
1	E	98.3	83.3	97.5	1.9	0.6	147	19.4
2	E	97.9	84.0	97.8	2.2	0.0	74	30.3
3	E	97.5	85.7	95.1	3.7	0.0	125	17.3
4	E	97.9	89.0	98.2	0.8	0.0	90	17.6
5	E	97.8	89.0	98.7	1.3	0.2	108	29.8
6	E	97.7	96.8	99.6	0.3	0.2	103	20.7
7	E	97.9	100.0	98.9	1.1	0.1	89	32.8
8	E	97.2	41.9	85.8	10.4	1.1	63	10.2
9	E	97.5	51.1	90.8	6.8	1.2	64	8.9
10	E	97.1	53.3	92.9	5.8	0.0	106	15.3
11	E	96.1	57.1	92.2	6.5	0.0	127	17.3
12	E	96.8	68.1	98.2	1.1	0.2	56	11.7
13	E	97.1	79.5	94.7	3.3	0.5	111	21.3
14	H	94.6	40.5	91.6	7.1	0.1	285	14.4
15	M	97.5	39.7	91.7	7.1	0.2	84	10.3
16	M	96.3	53.9	92.0	6.8	0.4	96	14.8
17	M	96.8	67.8	93.7	5.5	0.0	96	13.3



## **Appendix D**



**TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

A Member of The Texas A&M University System

March 23, 2001

Dear Participant:

I am presently conducting a research study title, "Characteristics of Successful Principals in a South Texas Border Town." The purpose of this research is to examine the leadership characteristics of principals of successful schools in Laredo. This study is in collaboration with Texas A&M International University.

As a result, I wish to collect data via a survey instrument and a subsequent follow-up interview. I estimate that completion of this survey will take approximately 30 minutes. Please do not write your name on the survey.

All research participants are being asked to participate voluntarily. No risks are foreseen for you as a result of your participation. Be assured that all data will be treated in a professional manner and kept confidential, including the identification of the school.

You have several choices regarding non-participation in this study: (1) you may refuse participation; (2) you may decide not to answer some of the questions (3) or you may decide to cease participation once begun.

While participation in this study is voluntarily, the quality of the study is dependent upon a high participation rate. Your assistance is essential to the success of this study.

Should you need additional information regarding this study, please do not hesitate to call me at (956) 326-2682.

Sincerely,

Dr. Carolyn McCreight and Dr. Claudio Salinas  
Researchers

**5201 University Boulevard, Laredo, Texas 78041-1900, (956)-326-2436 FAX (956)-326-2675**



**TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

A Member of The Texas A&M University System

Title: "Characteristics of Successful Principals in a South Texas Border Town."

Principal Investigator: Dr. Carolyn McCreight and Dr. Claudio Salinas  
TAMIU Faculty Member

Re: Consent Form

I am being asked to participate in the above-mentioned project. My participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I may refuse to participate or may decide to cease participation once begun. Should I withdraw from the study, which I may do at any time, or should I refuse to participate in the study, my decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am asked to read the consent form carefully and will be given a copy of it to keep if I decide to participate in this study.

I understand that the purpose of this study is (1) to gather the perceptions of present and former ACP participants regarding the qualities of experience provided by the program; (2) to obtain information about how many ACPs are still in the field; and (3) to obtain information regarding professional mobility. I understand that the total completion time for this questionnaire is about 30 minutes.

I have been informed that I will not experience any risks with participation, nor will I receive direct benefit. The information collected, however, will help college educators better understand and implement teacher educator programs for post-baccalaureate candidates.

Furthermore, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of my completed survey. This will be done by not writing my name or school's name on the survey instrument.

The researcher has the right to withdraw me from this study at any time. The researcher has offered to answer all my questions regarding the study or the data collection procedures. I may contact the researcher, Claudio Salinas, at (956) 326-2682 during working hours.

My signature below acknowledges my voluntary participation in this research project.

**5201 University Boulevard, Laredo, Texas 78041-1900, (956)-326-2436 FAX (956)-326-2675**

**I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE AND HAD MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. AFTER IT IS SIGNED, I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AT TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY (956) 32-2518. ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.**

## High Performing School Questionnaire

### Participant Information

- ❖ Years of experience in this district: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Positions held other than principal: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Years of experience as principals at the current school: \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ School enrollment \_\_\_\_\_
- ❖ Participant Ethnicity: Anglo \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ Black \_\_\_\_\_  
Other \_\_\_\_\_ (Check one of the above.)
- ❖ Participant Gender. (Please circle one.) Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions:

1. Rank the following items in order of importance in school success:

- \_\_\_\_\_ school vision and mission
- \_\_\_\_\_ curriculum alignment
- \_\_\_\_\_ parent involvement
- \_\_\_\_\_ shared decision making
- \_\_\_\_\_ teacher expertise
- \_\_\_\_\_ team building

2. In your opinion, what is the most important factor influencing student success?

3. What practices do you use to increase student attendance or keep students in school?

4. How do you meet the needs of limited English proficient students?

5. Please rank the following components in order of importance to school success.

(Rank from “1,” important to “5,” unimportant)

\_\_\_\_\_ school climate

\_\_\_\_\_ student discipline

\_\_\_\_\_ consideration for cultural diversity

\_\_\_\_\_ monitoring student achievement

\_\_\_\_\_ allocation of resources

\_\_\_\_\_ staff development

6. How do you work with immigrant students?

7. How do you and your staff meet the needs of students that enter your school with a history of low achievement?

8. What do you and your staff do when you encounter teachers who do not share the high achievement mission for the school?

9. What do you look for when recruiting new teachers?

10. If you were to serve as a mentor for a new principal of a low-performing school in a high poverty area in South Texas who wants to make that school high-performing like your school, what basic things would you recommend to start the new principal toward success?