

Texas Center Research Fellows Grant Program

**Perceptions of Educational Leaders of Salient
Factors in Turn Around Efforts in Pursuit of Future
Success in Meeting Average Yearly Progress
Concerns**

Report Submitted By:

Dr. Emma Alicia Garza

Dr. Claudio Salinas

November 2, 2007

Perceptions of Educational Leaders of Salient Factors in Turn Around Efforts in Pursuit
of Future Success in Meeting Average Yearly Progress Concerns

Introduction

Instructional leadership has been identified as one of the most important roles a school principal has in the educational system. Student performance is said to be impacted by effective instructional practices which reflect an orchestrated effort between teachers, parents, and more importantly, administrators. The 21st Century principal has to possess certain qualities that can help promote effective teaching and learning opportunities. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 outlined certain expectations for equalizing instruction and closing the academic gap that exists among student populations across the United States. Accountability in the 21st century has become synonymous with continuous school reform. A major part of the school reform brought about by NCLB to provide equal learning and achieving opportunities for all students regardless of their background is to increase the levels and complexity of accountability.

Instructional leaders are aware that in an effort to provide students of all ethnic backgrounds with the necessary tools to be successful learners, they must look at how external accountability i.e. complying with policies and legislation and internal accountability i.e. the level of expectations for student learning and achieving and the level of instructional intensity are connected. The interconnectedness between what policies dictate, what instructional intensity means, and how performance is manifested through the application of concepts and skills they have learned. Evidently, instructional

leaders who can see this interconnectedness have somehow figured out the right things to do to turn schools around (Elmore, 2004).

Administration has taken the leading role in managing instructional practices internally as well as managing instructional structures and processes. The structures found surrounding teaching and learning situations are complex and often place demands on teachers. Many teachers find themselves working in isolation within the confines of their classrooms often facing uncertainty and the mounting pressures of high stakes accountability. Instructional leaders who permit this structure to exist among the teachers are inadvertently contributing to the demise of effective instructional practices and to widening the academic achievement gap between student populations further.

School improvement in this type of structure happens as a consequence of certain qualities that effective instructional leaders possess and are able to execute to turn low-performing schools around. These instructional leaders are able to connect instructional structures and promote team-building efforts among teachers in order to create school-site accountability that relies on effectiveness, depth and breadth of instruction. The internal accountability is driven by standard-based instruction which is connected directly to goal-oriented, skills development. These intense and cognitive demanding practices of instruction need to be cohesively related to the standards or goals that have been identified in the structure of teaching and learning. Additionally, team-building is a critical part of the process of school improvement and must include students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Capacity building is another essential part of school improvement which is the cornerstone for improving skills and knowledge for both teachers and students. School

administrators and teachers will do what they have to do to improve teaching and learning but only to the extent that they are capable of. This is why capacity building has to be included in any school improvement effort. How do you build capacity? The first step in capacity building would be to identify the variables and barriers that exist in the current instructional structure and process. Second, find out the instructional quality and intensity of what is happening in teaching and learning situations. Many instructional practices found in low-performing schools include poorly defined learning expectations, lack of instructional intensity, low cognitive demand, and incoherence of what the different key players in the structure are trying to do.

The central issue remains. Can instructional leaders figure out what the right thing to do is and can they impart the knowledge to help others understand their role in the improvement process?

Statement of the Problem

School reforms are not new to the educational system. Different eras throughout the history of the United States have produced accountability measures which have led to different reforms. Most of the reforms have concentrated the focus on teaching performance and student academic outcomes. In the 1980s, A Nation At Risk Report identified some gaps in the public education system in the United States between minority and majority students. This report created a panic in the educational scene and heightened public concern for education. The grim picture presented in this report caused policymakers to look at equalization of educational opportunities across diverse populations. Twenty years after A Nation At Risk Report was released, student

performance outcomes as measured through high-stakes testing accountability, still show that a gap between minority and majority student populations exists.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 2001 outlines several provisions related to teacher quality. The policies established through this reauthorization target the processes used for teacher certification, mastery of the teachers' content areas, and promote professional development for teachers. Despite the many efforts to improve educational practices brought about by school reform throughout the decades, United States education has not produced student results that reflect equalization or closing the gaps.

Significance of the Study

It is of paramount interest to produce research that seeks to identify qualities of instructional leaders who are making a difference and turning low-performing schools around. These qualities are hard to pin-point but nonetheless contribute collectively to the turn around efforts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the leadership qualities that are identified as significant in school improvement efforts. The data collected for this study represents the views of school administrators who are assigned to public schools which are or have been identified as low performing. The main focus of the data revolves around key elements found in instructional and administrative practices which are seen as factors which helped schools not meeting AYP requirements to show improvement.

Limitations of the Study

This research study is limited in several ways. First, the research study is limited to a researcher-developed questionnaire. This questionnaire contains questions that address internal accountability and are limited to the following areas: 1) leadership actions which set the tone for school improvement; 2) expectations for teaching and learning; 3) collaborative efforts for school improvement; 4) student achievement data used for school improvement; and 5). Maximizing instructional time. Second, the participant sample is limited to school administrators who are or have been assigned to a school not meeting the AYP requirements. Third, the data collected for this study is limited to two years (2004-2005 and 2005-2006). Fourth, the reliability of the data depends highly on the honesty of responses provided by the participants.

Working Review of Selected Literature

The Current Structure of the Teaching-Learning Framework

The current structure of the teaching-learning framework operates on the basis that skills, content, and accommodations are part of the knowledge-base of teachers delivering instruction. Thus, the depth and breadth of skills and knowledge development are affected by outer accountability issues brought on by high stakes testing. Time-frames used for instruction are limited to what teaching-to-the-test dictates and this has an impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The instruction is driven by this outer accountability and impacts the level of internal accountability. Teachers who operate within this structure are creating what “they” know to be the best teaching-

learning situations they can create. The point of reference that many teachers use in this outer accountability system is modeled by instructional accountability measures which place demands on leadership expectations, pressures and anxieties (Kohn, 2001).

Building capacity in administrators helps to indoctrinate them into a system of internal accountability. Many administrators need capacity building in order to be able to solve the problems brought about by systemic reform in schools. Instructional leadership warrants assuming responsibilities within the structures and policies involved in effective teaching and learning. Consequently, some administrators are not prepared to do so.

Performance-based accountability requires that administrators possess qualities that lead to guidance and direction of both teacher and student performance. This process includes distributed leadership. This structure calls for administrators to develop and improve the knowledge and skills of teachers involved in order to create and believe in a common culture of expectations. Improvement of instruction and student performance relies heavily on the productive relationships that each individual in an organization has with each other. The common framework found in this structure is expertise among teachers that can be shaped to fit the instructional process and obtain shared results. When teachers share in the leadership, they become an integral part of the synergy of improvement. This synergy contributes to the structure by providing multiple sources of expertise, leadership, guidance and direction (Spillane, Halverson et al., 1999).

The distribution of leadership goes hand-in-hand with the distribution of knowledge. Moreover, expertise among individuals creates the opportunity to distribute knowledge and create shared expertise situations to provide this distribution of knowledge at a larger scale. Taking this structure a level higher would include creating

focused professional development that consists of specified goals which give direction and purpose to learning and developing large scale expertise. According to Rosenhotz (1985), effective schools have congruency between values, norms, and behaviors of principals and teachers. An alignment exists between what is done at the school level and what is done at the classroom level. Professional development activities become purposeful and lead to shared knowledge when they are directly linked to instruction.

Another critical component of this current structure for teaching and learning involves synchronization. When teachers share their knowledge and expertise between and among each other, this creates a level field which provides focus on instructional goals and promotes the notion that skills, knowledge, and expertise can be fine-tuned and developed further over time. Synchronized efforts in creating standards that are goal-oriented and driven by a focus of improved teaching and student performance serve as a catalyst for mutual assistance and collegiality among teachers and administrators. The ultimate accomplishment of this structure can highly impact student performance. The level field equalizes the development of knowledge while creating a “team” approach.

School Improvement Efforts

School improvement efforts are continuous and should be supported by an institutional structure which embraces collective practices. Collective practices include teachers working together and learning from each other to improve instruction. This can be achieved through collaborative sharing of knowledge about instruction and student learning. Isolated classrooms only serve to widen achievement gaps and create learning environments restricted by individual teachers’ ideas and practices.

Teachers who participate in collective learning practices gain a better understanding of the concepts of instructional practices that can help improve not only teacher effectiveness but student achievement. Effective leaders look at improvement of practice and performance as the core of instructional improvement. Through collective learning practices and experiences, school improvement efforts serve to empower teachers.

Leadership in the current teaching learning framework establishes environments of opportunity. These environments inculcate both collective and continuous learning for individuals within the organization, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and outside of the organization, community members, and society at-large. The processes involved in the structure of school environment include: 1) value learning which is a result from the capacity-building activities created for teachers, by teachers, 2) collective learning which involves teacher areas of expertise and sharing of such expertise, 3) producing instructional practices which reflect the collective efforts of the teachers, and 4) learning “how” to accomplish these tasks together. School environments which follow continuous learning and sharing view often produce reciprocity of accountability and significantly reach heightened teacher and student performance (Elmore, 1997).

Learning to understand and do the right thing for teachers and students establishes the levels of expertise among teachers in order to benchmark the level of professional training that is to take place; collectively working towards creating and nurturing collegial agreement on what is worth achieving; connecting people with new and varied ideas that are tried, tested and often challenged; and what is known and what is learned.

Institutional Design for School Improvement

The institutional design for the 21st century views large-scale improvement as going beyond recruiting and retaining teachers. It works on the premise that people qualities are what drive the system, not the system itself. Redesigning for school improvement is a complex process and encompasses norms, values, attitudes, perceptions and interests of the stakeholders within an organization. The clarity of purpose for institutional design has as its central focus teachers teaching and students learning. Standard-based reform sets content and performance at the forefront despite flaws in the accountability system (Drury, 1999).

Instructional quality is linked to teacher performance and student performance. Teacher quality is critical and vital to student achievement. Teachers must be prepared to demonstrate proficiency in subject knowledge and teaching skills that are basic to core academic content. The term “highly qualified” teacher is defined under the No Child Left Behind Act as those who have been fully licensed or certified by the state and not had any waivers pertaining to certification or licensure requirements i.e. emergency permits, temporary or provisional basis (ESEA 2001).

Research Method

This research study utilized a twenty-two item questionnaire which contained questions which related back to the literature on school improvement. The questions were formulated to focus on internal school accountability structures which revolved around intensity of school improvement efforts such as leadership actions and processes, expectations of teaching and learning, using student achievement data for improvement,

restructuring curriculum to better meet the needs of all students, and planning for in-depth acquisition of knowledge and skills. Administrators from two school districts were asked to participate in this pilot study by completing and returning the questionnaire. The participants are or have been assistant principals or principals in schools which did not meet the AYP requirements for 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. The number of participants will increase as the study is extended to the Rio Grande Valley. Open-ended responses were also gathered as part of this pilot study and will also be included in the rest of the study. The data gathered from this initial pilot study will serve to improve the research instrument as well.

Pilot Study Findings

The data gathered for this pilot study was disaggregated and analyzed to identify factors that were common in participant responses regarding school improvement efforts. Participants' perceptions of what helps schools improve and be able to meet accountability standards were very much in line with what the literature says. Some of the findings specified the following actions as critical to school improvement. First, participants identified school administrators and teachers collaboratively responsible for restructuring the school environment to include collaboration as a key factor for turning a school around.

Second, student achievement is the most significant factor in school accountability and school improvement efforts. Participants identified students' needs as driving effective instructional practices. Instruction is influenced by reaching all students through connected learning and student-centered work. In order to meet students' needs

more effectively, participants emphasized the use of assessment data in making the most informed decisions regarding students' needs. Participants responded that instruction and assessments need to be aligned to the curriculum.

Third, building capacity within the faculty and staff was another factor identified by the participants as crucial for school improvement. Focusing on teacher strengths, building teachers' teaching effectiveness, and providing the most appropriate professional development were also seen as major factors for success. Building capacity-knowledge of instructional practices through people who are knowledgeable in the different areas of content and pedagogy will strengthen the instructional program and lead to more effective teaching and learning. Additionally, collective learning of effective instructional practices which promote high expectations was at the top of the list for most participants. Focusing on steps that produce progress rather than just looking at the end product can ensure a more systematic way of improving student achievement and sustaining it.

Fourth, everyone working together rather than in isolation through collaborative planning, monitoring and student assistance leads to collective learning and responsibility. . Orchestration of activities clarity and agreement with students and support staff contribute to school improvement. Fifth, participants identified intensity of teaching and in-depth learning through higher levels of cognition as vital for students to internalize knowledge. In-depth learning is acquired when content and skills are routinized and applied. Finally, participants specified that parental involvement in school improvement efforts should include reaching out to parents and enlisting their support and collaboration.

The data seems to indicate that school improvement efforts across campuses do not differ in the identification of factors that directly impact student achievement. Most of the school improvement efforts have congruent activities that lead to teacher empowerment through effective professional development, capacity building of effective instructional practices, collective learning and sharing of faculty and staff through team-building, a strong alignment between instruction and assessments, the use of assessment data for structuring and redesigning instruction to meet students' needs, and the incorporation of instructional practices that promote higher level thinking and application.

School improvement efforts have helped many schools turn around and be able to meet the expected accountability standards. The information gathered through this study may help to provide a link for networking with educators across schools and districts in a continuous effort to share effective practices that can improve student achievement and help schools meet accountability standards.