

**CHANGING OF THE GUARD:  
PRINCIPAL EXPERIENCE OF SUCCESSION**

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**Abstract**

This multiple case study explored the experiences of ten school principals regarding succession planning. Principals purposefully selected from elementary, middle, and high school levels were interviewed about their transitions to the principalship, the support they received as principals, and how they are preparing their buildings of charge for their departures.

Data analysis revealed findings in the areas of school leadership, retention, hiring practices, supportive relations, and school transitions. Participants reported experiencing forms of informal succession planning through recruitment, professional development, and mentoring. Principal recruitment and sponsorship was the norm; however, participants reported feeling confused by inconsistent hiring preferences and procedures.

## INTRODUCTION

Efforts to improve student academic performance have been the primary focus of educators since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. However, numerous school reform measures requiring continuous effort along with a multitude of resources have produced inconsistent results. Because principals are at the apex of any schoolwide transition, principal turnover and a lack of succession planning may be a factor in schools' lack of success in meeting required accountability standards.

Empirical studies show that principals impact academic achievement through their influence over teacher performance and student engagement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Prestine & Nelson, 2005). Principals indirectly affect student learning through their influence on stakeholders, the vision and mission of the school, organizational structures of the school, professional associations and school culture (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Teacher turnover rates have been shown to be higher in schools where principal turnover has occurred (Fuller, Young & Baker 2007; Levy, Fields & Jablonski, 2006). Principal retention has also been shown to be affected by the school's demographics (Thomson, 2009). In addition, teacher turnover has been linked to low student performance as well as to the "serious negative financial and educational impacts on schools" (Fuller & Young, 2009, p. 18). In a study conducted by Hargreaves and Fink (2004), seven schools were analyzed for the ability to achieve school reform while working through leadership transition along with federal pressures to increase student test scores. The researchers found that "leadership succession is rarely successful" (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, p. 10). Businesses and not-for-profit organizations alike recognize the need to prepare for leadership changes through succession planning (Fulmer & Conger, 2004; Kesner & Sebora, 1994; Rothwell, 2016; Meinert, 2018). Few studies, however, have described the principal's experiences of succession.

For the purposes of this study, a succession plan was defined as an organization's plan to promote, train and replace essential personnel to cause the least amount of disruption to the group's performance. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) reported six succession practices as being successful: (1) long before the loss of a leader, a successor should be considered, (2) succession plans should be part of the annual school planning process, (3) the responsibility for succession plans should be distributed to keep leaders from choosing clones of themselves, (4) the plans should reflect the specific needs of the school, (5) succession plans should be easy to interpret and accessible to stakeholders, and (6) plans should include specific leadership traits. Mentoring has been shown to be a key component in supporting principals in their new role (Peters, 2011, Hall and Simeral, 2008). Meinert (2018) urged organizations to keep written succession plans that are simple, updated regularly and transparent. She stressed the importance of the employee knowing they are being trained for a leadership position.

Organizations recognize that retention of a quality work force is paramount to sustainability as well as to profits. The business industry recognized this need prior to the public sector and the field of education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Fusaelli, Fusarelli & Riddick, 2018). Large businesses began focusing their daily routines around the function of succession planning (Rothwell, 2016). Organizations choosing to ignore succession planning find it difficult to continue their success from one leader to the next (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY

Utilizing a constructivist viewpoint, this multiple case study of ten principals from the southern United States explored principal experiences of succession planning. The results addressed the themes and differences reported by principal leaders in succession planning at the high school, middle, and elementary levels of public school.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do public school principals describe their succession planning experiences?
2. What succession practices have the principals found of benefit in their daily tasks?

### Theoretical Perspective

The study explored the nature of leader succession through the assumption that meaning can be derived only through the subjective lens of constructivism. Constructivism has been supported by numerous social scientists as a useful perspective in qualitative studies (Crotty, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Neuman, 2000). Social constructivism holds that behind an event, each individual creates a separate meaning perceptually different from that of anyone else. "These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8).

### Participants and Context

Purposive sampling techniques provided information rich cases suitable for qualitative methods (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Ten principals in the southern United States who worked in one of three urban school districts with a student population of over 7,000 participated in the study. District size selection criteria was based on the assumption that school district organizational configuration influences principal responsibilities as well as the pattern of succession planning used in the district. For example, school districts with over 7,000 students are likely to have separate departments that deal with the succession planning process (curriculum planning, professional development and human resources). Therefore, district size was held constant to help insure similar organizational characteristics.

Participating principals met the selection criteria of employment in their current positions for more than one year but not more than 6 years. The assumption was that without a full year of experience, the principals would not be able to recognize what succession experiences had been of benefit to them. The years of experience at a particular school were limited for participants to less than 7 years based on research findings that show that reform implementation review is recommended after five years (White & Cooper, 2011). Gender, age, and length of time in the educational field were not factors in participant selection.

Building level differences were expected due to the unique developmental curriculum demands the age groups place on their schools. For example, Heck (1992) showed that secondary principals spend fewer hours on instructional tasks than do elementary principals. Therefore, the ability to break out the different functional requirements for different school levels was important.

The selected schools were all urban; 7 of the 10 schools received Title I funding (federally assisted, low-income based on the percent of free or reduced lunches served to

students); 9 of the 10 were classified as low performing (In-Need-of-Improvement). Five schools studied had been honored as being in the top 20% of the schools state-wide. Of the 5 honored schools, 4 were on the list of low performing schools. Honored schools received additional funds for each student as an award. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study; in this article, pseudonyms are used for all districts, schools, and participants. Table 1 provides information on the participants and their districts.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Status and Achievement Status for 2014 -2015

Case Studied	Percent Free or Reduced Lunches	State Department Status	Honored by State Amount Received
1. Denver Jackson	55	Achieving	Yes – 10% \$40,613.45
2. Carol Smith	64	In Need of Improvement	Yes – 20% \$39,611.15
3. Matt Turner	68	In Need of Improvement	No
4. Danny Weaver	13	In Need of Improvement	Yes – 10% 50,312.57
5. Ed Freeman	32	In Need of Improvement	Yes – 10% 70,761.80
6. Todd Lawson	29	In Need of Improvement	No
7. Carl Roberts	28	In Need of Improvement	No
8. Sherry Taylor	80	In Need of Improvement	No
9. Don Gordon	57	In Need of Improvement	Yes – 20% 25,942.13
10. John Johnson	30	In Need of Improvement	No

All ten participants worked within the three school districts with student populations of over 7,000. Within the Cane Valley and Fairview districts, participants represented each of the three building levels (elementary, middle, high school); in the Belmont District, the four participants led at four building levels (elementary, junior high, middle and high school).

We gathered data through face-to-face interviews, observations, and artifacts. Reviews of sources available to the general public produced artifacts prior to interviews, and participants contributed additional articles at their interviews. Artifacts of interest included state required student testing data, professional development offerings, school planning documents and district documentation of succession events. Individually, participants reviewed their transcribed interview for clarity and accuracy.

## Data Analysis

Creswell's (2009) systematic procedures provided the method for coding data. Preparing the data for analysis involved transcribing interviews, typing all field notes, and arranging journal entries and scanned artifacts. An initial reading of all interviews for first impressions and sense making followed. Next, we placed notations in the margins of any initial themes and highlighted "rich participant quotes or passages" (Saldana, 2013, p. 19). Finally, we placed data into chunked pieces according to natural topic changes. Topics derived from the notes on these chunked pieces of data, "chunked topics," we then categorized as "major topics, unique topics and left overs" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186).

Data analysis included a three-step process. First, we sorted data by using a coding system that allowed for relationships to freely emerge. Next, through an analysis of the theoretical basis of the data, we looked for commonality among the coded items and theoretical orientation. Through this process, we examined the transcribed data for commonalities and differences in word usage as well as conceptual themes. In the last step, we sought to cross code relationships between the items. Individual cases were coded separately using the above process. After we coded all the cases, we analyzed participant data from within the same district for group themes (3 or 4 participants within each district) as well as across districts by building level. In the last step of the analysis, we examined the relationship among all data collected (total of 10 case studies combined).

## The Three Districts

Cane Valley District spans 256 square miles, consists of 15 elementary schools, 4 middle schools and 3 high schools, and had a total student population of 15,027. According to the U.S. Census Bureau report, the 2014 median income for Cane Valley was \$53,787. Belmont District covers 31.5 square miles, consists of 9 elementary schools, 3 junior high schools, 4 middle schools and 1 high school with a total student population of 15,492. The median income for Belmont in 2014 was \$56,408 as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Fairview school district covers 113 square miles with 8 elementary schools, 4 middle schools and 1 high school, and a total student population of 9,421. In 2014, the U.S. Census showed the median income for Fairview was \$36,789.

Based on estimates from the years taught or from individual disclosure, participants ranged in approximate ages of 38 to 68 years. Table 2 details each principal's years of experience in education by teaching and administrative positions.

Table 2 - Years of Experience

Principal	District	School	Years Teaching	Years Assistant Principal	Years of Previous Principal	Years as Principal
Denver Jackson	Cane Valley	Rosewood Elementary	14	6	3	3
Carol Smith	Cane Valley	Holmes Elementary	6	4	2	6
Matt Turner	Cane Valley	Cane Valley High School	11	2	6	1
Danny Weaver	Belmont	Butcher Elementary	12	2	4	2
Ed Freeman	Belmont	King Junior High	8	3	3	2
Todd Lawson	Belmont	Olson Middle School	5	5	5	2
Carl Roberts	Belmont	Belmont High School	5	4	4	1
Sherry Taylor	Fairview	Alread Elementary	10	3	8	2
Don Gordon	Fairview	Harrison Middle School	14	3	8	1
John Johnson	Fairview	Fairview High School	4	0	4	4

All participants had four or more years' experience in the classroom. Participants' assistant principal experience ranged from 2 to 6 years; only one participant had no experience as an assistant principal. Three participants had previous experience as a building principal. John Johnson reported 8 years' previous experience; Matt Turner had 10 years' previous experience as a principal; Ed Freeman led as a principal in two small schools. Participants reported their predecessors led their buildings for 2 to 8 year terms. Only one participant, Danny Weaver, was not from the region.

The following case reports are organized according to the district of participant employment (Cane Valley, Belmont and Fairview) and by the building level they led (elementary, middle, high school). Case studies are reported by the primary investigator.

### **Case 1: Denver Jackson, Cane Valley District, Rosewood Elementary**

Denver Jackson's office had formal old school ambiance; her desk was topped with few items, including an iPad. The largest office wall held a book shelf she referred to several times during our interview.

Denver's 22 years of experience in education in the Cane Valley district, including five years as a teacher, followed a two year "hiatus" in another state. She reported coming into the principal's position through a series of "taps," often referred to as being encouraged. She might

not have applied for the assistant principal position had she not been encouraged to do so. She explained, “I think it was kind of expected and I kind of knew that. I feel the area assistant superintendent, though, would have supported me if I didn’t want to apply.”

Denver’s primary concern was finding time for her family while maintaining long hours at work. She reflected, “The problem is always time. That is a huge piece and there is so much to do. I could work until 8 or 9 o’clock every night, and I’ve tried.” Her initial mentor assisted her by giving her the “total picture.” Denver credited her mentor as emphasizing the need to network and develop building management skills: “I did not always appreciate the networking part....So, I had to learn that management piece, and she was good to help show me how to balance that.”

### **Case 2: Carol Smith, Cane Valley District, Holmes Middle School**

Greeting me with a gracious smile and a handshake, Carol Smith led me to her office where I sat at a medium-sized utilitarian table across from her small older desk. She did not appear nervous; however, she gave more elaborate answers with richer descriptions as the interview progressed.

Carol began her career in education as a vocational business teacher at the junior high level before accepting an assistant principal position at another junior high within the district. After four years, she applied for a middle school assistant principal’s position in her district. She functioned as an assistant principal at Holmes Middle School for a couple of weeks before her principal moved up to a district level administrative position.

Carol met her first mentor, Dr. Jones, when she was a teacher and he was a middle school principal. Later, when she attended the state’s Master Principal Academy, Dr. Jones was assigned as her program mentor. She noted that having a mentor benefitted her by giving her a “sounding board.” Carol considered all her past principals as her mentors. “As far as being a principal in general, Mr. Brown, the man I worked for, did a beautiful job prepping me and letting me take on responsibility there.”

No one encouraged Carol to apply for the position of assistant principal with Holmes Middle School; in fact, her principal did not want her to leave. Carol recalled that a panel of building employees interviewed her first, and then she met with district administrators; she did not find the interviews intimidating because she knew four of the administrators. “If I were going to a district where I didn’t know anyone, I think that would be very different.”

Carol felt overwhelmed with the ever-increasing list of job demands. She explained,

It takes more than any one person has to develop those around them and to keep all the balls in the air. It’s just—someone has to call calf rope at some point, because we just keep adding, and adding, and adding and at some point, it’s just not feasible anymore.

### **Case 3 – Matt Turner, Cane Valley District, Cane Valley High School**

Matt Turner met me at his office door dressed in coat, slacks, and tie of royal blue, the school’s color. Despite two office walls of windows, numerous plaques, pictures and sports memorabilia were either hung or propped up for display. As we began the interview, Matt recounted that he had been a principal in a small, rural district for 10 years prior to applying to the Cane Valley district. He worked two years as an assistant principal before being offered the

principalship at Cane Valley High School. “I showed interest in the principal’s position and they showed interest in me.... The principal left and I just kind of slid into that spot.” Regarding his predecessor who had been the principal for six years, Matt commented, “He was an outstanding principal, did a great job. It’s been a challenge. I just maintain and don’t let the train fall off the tracks.”

Matt received encouragement from his mentors, fellow assistant principals, and peers to apply for the principal’s position. He recalled that one mentor from his previous principal position expressed that he did not want him to leave the district. “He had hopes of me someday sliding into the superintendent’s position there, but at the same time, he was an encourager.” After discussing his application with his predecessor, Matt felt confident that he would be offered the principal’s position; he believed that the area superintendent saw him as “a good fit” for the position. He had been there for two years, and they “were happy with my job performance that I was doing here.” Matt had one interview with the superintendent and deputy superintendent for the position, and he “felt very good walking out of that interview.”

Matt did not find the interview process intimidating, “I felt very welcomed in the interview.” He conveyed that his past principal, the current assistant superintendent, was not included in the interview to insure an unbiased committee decision. Although he did not know how the transition would be handled during his eventual replacement, Matt commented,

I would prefer one of my assistant principals to assume my position when I leave.... I would definitely make myself available to support the new person. I would hope that I would be allowed input on the new person, but that is not a guaranteed assumption. It would largely depend on the nature of my departure. If I was promoted in the organization, I think that I would have a large amount of input. However, if I left for another organization, I might not be afforded that opportunity.

#### **Case 4 – Danny Weaver, Belmont District, Butcher Elementary**

Danny Weaver strode down the hallway of offices to greet me with an outstretched hand. Entering her office, she motioned to her desk and apologized for the stacks of papers around her computer. In the corner across from her desk was a small round table with two comfortable high backed chairs. Danny sat down at the table and gestured for me to do the same.

Danny had been principal of Butcher Elementary for two years. She taught elementary school for 12 years, then became the assistant principal at Butcher Elementary for two years. Danny confided that her application for the assistant principal position at Butcher came about through a chance meeting of the assistant principal who encouraged her to apply for his position. She stated that being an assistant principal in the building gave her the opportunity to become familiar with the specific role responsibilities prior to becoming the school principal.

Danny completed two interviews for her current positon as principal at Butcher. She also interviewed with a neighboring district that required her to complete four interviews prior to turning her down for the job. She explained she did not anticipate the competition for education positions in the region; she found herself at a disadvantage because she was not employed within the district:

Not only are you competing with people from out of state that are applying for these positions, but you are also competing with people who have been in the district, where the district knows this person, that person has been loyal to the school system.

She left the principal interview at Butcher Elementary “feeling pretty positive about me being one of the final candidates.” She stated, “My superintendent told me there were sixty people that applied.... I was just a little shocked...I had only worked as an assistant principal for two years.”

#### **Case 5 – Ed Freeman, Belmont District, King Junior High**

Stepping around the corner of the office, Ed Freeman surveyed the room with a warm expression until he caught my eye; then, he immediately greeted me with an outstretched hand. In his office, a large walnut desk with an overstuffed executive’s chair behind it held court, a visitor’s chair to the side. In the back were a small table and two matching chairs. He moved toward his desk for the interview, but then changed his mind. Sitting across from me, he fidgeted with his wedding band as he began to explain the career path that led him to King Junior High and the city of Belmont.

Ed taught for eight years prior to beginning his administrative career as a principal in another area of the state. He was promoted to the central office as the assistant superintendent after only one year, but despite his success, Ed wanted to move to Belmont. He began “courting” them as a future employer by developing his skills in computer technology. The district hired him for a temporary grant-funded technology position; the following year, he took the position of assistant principal for academic services at the high school and remained in the position for three years.

When asked what factors had influenced him to apply for a principal’s position, Ed stated, “When I became a coach teacher, I was only in the business a few years, and I started feeling that tug of administration...I had building-wide and district-wide leadership roles as a teacher and coach. It was just a natural progression.”

His predecessor led King Junior High for three years before moving to a new building in the district. He recalled, “Ms. Cooper was selected to be the principal a year and a half prior, so everyone knew that this position was going to be open.” However, when the position came open, Ed did not apply for it. “I assumed they didn’t need me in the position. In the world that I grew up in, in small schools, when an opening happened at the administrative level, the superintendent had an idea of who he wanted.” Since the district had seen his work for over three years, he assumed they would call him if they wanted him for the position. “So, I didn’t apply. . . Then, one day my phone rang and it was the human resources director and executive director of communications and they were just like, ‘Why didn’t you apply?’”

Ed favors in-district hiring because he fears that an outsider might have a great job interview, but not do a good job for the district.

They placed adds in all the publications, nationwide search. And, both times they’ve hired people that were already in Belmont.... So, I just think that it is

easier to hire and pick good people, especially if you know them. You see them work every day. You know what they are capable of (Steele, 2015, p. 125).

He explained,

I still think that—that if I am the superintendent, I am going to keep my eye out, like, I am a principal now. So, I'm keeping my eye out for teachers. . . . It is like college football, you're trying to recruit players (Steele, 2015, p. 124).

Initially, a three-person panel consisting of the executive director of human resources, the curriculum director, and the professional development director interviewed Ed. "They had selected out four or five people. So, then they moved two names forward to Mr. White, our superintendent." Describing his interview with the superintendent, Ed explained, "I didn't find it intimidating since they had called me. I felt like, unless I just go in there and screw up—because they had all this time to find who they wanted."

Asked about the transition during his eventual replacement, Ed paused in thought, then replied that it would largely depend on the circumstances under which he left. If he retired from King or received a promotion to the central office, he believed the district would hire one of his current assistant principals and move a teacher from his building into the open assistant principal's position. He smiled as he said,

This thing would just keep rolling. If they are dumb, which they are sometimes, I'll even take one or two with me, they'll hire someone new, come in here with guns a blazing...and flip the thing over, or they will come in here and take it to a whole other level.

#### **Case 6 – Todd Lawson, Belmont District, Olson Middle School**

Before I could settle into the waiting area at Olson Middle School, Todd Lawson rushed out of his office, greeted me with a warm smile, and immediately showed me back to his office. His laptop computer with the screen pointed toward the opposite door lay open on his desk; a small stack of papers was nearby. Relaxing in one of the conference chairs with his legs outstretched and crossed, Todd explained this was his third year at Olson Middle School. He began his career teaching middle school in a neighboring district; during his five year teaching period, he went back to school, earned his master's degree, and obtained his administrative license. He accepted an administrative position and served two years as an assistant principal for an elementary school. Subsequently, he moved to an assistant principal position in a middle school located in the same district where he remained for five years.

Todd learned about his current position through a conversation with Ms. Snow, who led the school for five years before being assigned to open up a new school in the district. Ms. Snow had encouraged Todd to apply for the assistant principal's position at Olson earlier in his career, but he turned her down. He praised Ms. Snow, "There are a few principals in Belmont that I certainly look to. Those are the people I want to have conversations with and those are the people I can grow with. She is certainly one of those people."

Along with his predecessor, Ms. Snow, Todd was encouraged to apply for his current position by a friend who previously had been the assistant principal at Olson. When asked if he

would have applied for the position without encouragement, Todd quickly answered, “No, I wouldn’t have.” He went on to explain that after having been turned down for the principal position in Cane Valley, he had lacked confidence in his ability.

Todd’s current assistant principal was the assistant principal for Ms. Snow as well. He confided, “That was also a part of the change because he [the assistant principal] was the other finalist for the job. I was the jerk principal coming in who took his chair and it was supposed to be his.”

The interview process for Todd’s current position as principal involved an initial panel interview with 12 people. Leaving the interview, Todd doubted he would be offered the position because of his poor interview performance. He did not expect a call back interview with the director of human resources and the superintendent.

The district hired Todd in November and positioned him as the assistant principal while he continued at Belmont. “That gave me a full semester to basically be an assistant principal full time in Cane Valley and be a principal full time in Belmont.” This helped him become familiar with the specific role responsibilities prior to becoming the school’s principal. He explained,

I had a great opportunity that a lot of principals don’t have. I had six months of basically training with my predecessor. She would answer all of my questions. She’d answer all of my text messages. I look back now and we kind of laugh...about the questions that I asked.... They were really easy questions.... She never held judgment.

### **Case 7 – Carl Roberts, Belmont District, Belmont High School**

Within minutes of my arrival, Carl Roberts came out of a semi-glassed hallway and greeted me with a serious expression. Carl’s small desk was positioned in the front of the room; opposite the desk was a large oval table devoid of any materials. After he motioned me to the table, I sat near the window lined wall while he faced his desk. As I began asking the preplanned interview questions, Carl easily fell into step with the process. He reported he had been the principal at Belmont High School for one year. Prior to accepting the principalship, he was an assistant principal at Belmont for the four years under his predecessor. Before coming to the Belmont, Carl served as a principal for 11 years in a neighboring district. He taught math for five years prior to going into administration. Carl stated, “Several people encouraged me to, ‘Go for it.’ So, that is how I ended in this seat.”

Encouraged by his predecessor and other people to apply for the principal’s position at Belmont, Carl believes his supervisor “saw some potential in me that I would be leading here or somewhere else. I definitely saw some handing over of some responsibilities and things to get me those experiences to prepare me for the role.”

Carl held in a laugh and shook his head as he reflected on how he was interviewed for his current position. “Mine was kind of a unique one.... I was actually in charge of the interview committee to hire the person.” District personnel came to Carl and asked him to apply. “They spoke to me about the possibility. What my concerns were, those kinds of things.” Carl stated, “It was real important to me that the staff here was supportive of me taking that position. If I would not have had that sense, I probably wouldn’t have applied....”

Carl had two interviews before being offered the principalship. The first meeting was

with the district personnel discussing the position and the second with the superintendent. Asked if the interview process had been intimidating, he replied without hesitation, “It was pretty unique in the way it transpired, so it was more of informal conversations; so, it wasn’t stressful.” Adjusting in his seat, he grinned and confided, “I figure if it was the right fit and that was something the superintendent wanted me to do than I would do it.”

Discussing whether or not transitioning into the principalship from the assistant principal position within the district should be the preferential method of hiring, Carl stated, “With a school of this size, I am a firm believer that if you came in here cold, not knowing Belmont High School.... I am thinking of a two to three year learning curve, a steep learning curve.” Carl thought bringing someone in from outside of the district was “ideal”; however, he did not think districts could afford the time to train them.

When asked about his future professional goals, Carl sat up straighter in his chair with an intent expression. “I will probably be a superintendent in a school district... I am not ready for that yet; I still like the building too much.” His short term goal was the school’s mission. “What I am about every day and passionate about is what our mission is. I want relationship; I want people to feel good about work and about the results we’re getting and being appreciated in that sense.”

Carl visits monthly with his first principal in another district who mentored him for seven years as an assistant principal. He recalled,

I was new in administration and you are on a very steep learning curve.... He really helped me to learn the ropes of administration and how to manage a building and how to deal with people and all the things an administrator has to do.

Discussing his relationship with his assistant principals, a light of pride shown in Carl’s expression. He considers himself a mentor to his three assistant principals.

As a building principal, one of the greatest things that I do is to help foster growth in those assistant principals because in our district, the level of people that we hire, obviously you get hired as an assistant principal, then you obviously have the ability to be a building leader and so, I take it upon myself and am fairly intentional about making sure that I’m helping those people grow so that they can be building leaders.

### **Case 8 – Sherry Taylor, Fairview District, Alread Elementary**

Entering the red brick foyer of Alread Elementary, I announced my purpose in the building over an intercom speaker built into the wall next to the office door. In response, a woman I could see through the glassed entrance asked me to have a seat. During my wait in the foyer, a parent came in to inquire about what documents she needed for verification of residency to enroll her daughter. The parent was not allowed into the office even after showing documents to the clerk through the glass. Shortly after the parent concluded her business, the door buzzed open and the staff member announced over the intercom that Sherry Taylor would see me.

Sherry stood in the hallway waiting for me to cross the short distance to her office entrance. “Have a seat,” she politely said.

Sherry relayed to me that she taught in the classroom for five years and functioned as a

literacy coach for five years before going into administration. Prior to taking on the position of principal, Sherry was an assistant principal at another school in the district for three years. She had been the principal at Alread Elementary School for two years; her predecessor had led Alread for eight years.

I asked her how she learned about her current position, Sherry responded without hesitation, "My principal told me about it and another principal friend told me about it right away that it was coming open." She was encouraged to apply for her current position by a mentor, a friend from graduate school and a principal from a different building who called her and said, "I think this would be a good position for you."

When I asked whether she would have applied for the principalship without encouragement, Sherry smiled, nodded, and responded, "I would have because I was waiting. I had been an assistant principal for right at three and a half years because I took over as an assistant principal position in the middle of the year. I was ready—I was ready."

Sherry had two interviews for the principalship at Alread Elementary. The first interview was with a committee of teachers and other personnel who met at the district office. She recalled her second interview,

I interviewed with the superintendent individually. It pretty much was just a conversation.... She and I already knew each other.... She knew a lot about my philosophies. I know a lot about hers, so it was really just a conversation.

She remembered not being intimidated by the interview. "It really wasn't too bad as opposed to some of the other interviews that I had been in for assistant principal in some of the other districts where all of the district administrators are just staring at you." Tapping the pen against the desk, she confided, "I felt like just from the hearsay about who interviewed that I had a pretty good chance of getting it."

Prior to Sherry's acceptance of the principalship, Alread had never had an assistant principal to hand down building information. She recalled,

We had to piece a lot of things together ourselves and sometimes we pieced them together wrong. We made false assumptions or we didn't come to the conclusion quite as fast as if we had, had an assistant principal.

Sherry looked to the side as she reflected, "I was hired on like a Tuesday and started on a Wednesday." When she accepted the position, she did not think anything about the limited amount of time she had to prepare for the principalship. "I look back over it now, I think, 'Oh, my gosh, that was terrible.'"

### **Case 9 – Don Gordon, Fairview District, Harrison Middle School**

Within a few minutes after entering the partially glassed office, a tall, slender man walked into the foyer and offered me his hand. Don Gordon appeared a bit uncomfortable as he used short brisk movements and gestures to welcome me to the building.

Don's office had a large desk facing the door and a round table situated on the far side. He offered me a beverage and then motioned for me to sit down at the table. After he retrieved his cup of coffee, he took the spot facing the door and seemed to relax, although he appeared

eager to start the interview.

Don had been the principal at Harrison Middle School for one year. His predecessor opened the building and held the principalship at Harrison for 12 years. Prior to accepting his position at Harrison, Don was employed as an assistant middle school principal for three years in a similarly sized rural school. He taught 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade math for fourteen years before going into administration. Sitting forward, Don shared,

I learned about it [the principal position] through the grapevine.... But I had no inside track, and I don't even know if inside tracks exist. There is a myth that people think that there may be some, but I learned about the job officially through the internet, through the onsite, online job posting.

Sensing some defensiveness, I asked him if he had friends in the Fairview district who let him know about the upcoming position. He settled back into his chair and wrapped his hands around his coffee mug, then replied, "I found out about the principal retiring, but the assistant had been here for multiple years, and I assumed he was going to move into that position since I hadn't heard anything but great things about him."

Don considered his close friend to be a mentor. Don described their relationship: He has been a bigger sounding board.... He was an assistant [principal], then a principal, and now he's an assistant [principal] because he moved all over from the other side of the state and he had to get his foot in the door. So, he's preparing again to go back into being a principal.

When I asked if anyone encouraged him to apply for his position, Don responded,

My last boss in Shelbyville. She encouraged me.... I didn't think I was hitting it out of the park by any means, but she was like, "You're, ready." She told me that I was ready to have my own building. Nothing really opened up.

Sitting forward in his chair, Don explained,

It is best if you live there and work there because you get the whole picture.... The school is the pride of the city and it makes everything work much, much smoother. To go out and kind of chip my way in and get into that over there [Shelbyville] was tough.

When he applied for the principal's position at Harrison, his mentors were divided on their advice as to whether he should apply for the position. His boss from Shelbyville encouraged him, but his friend in the district did not. Sitting straight in his chair, he recalled his friend's response. "He thought I was crazy...it was my second application to this district in the second year and if you apply too much and get looked over then you get the stigma...."

The interview for his current position consisted of two separate meetings. The first was with a committee of approximately 10 people.

Everyone from assistant superintendents, one assistant superintendent, onedirector

of curriculum, a principal and the assistant principal who's currently here was also on the hiring interview.... When I saw him in there, I knew I had a chance at the job. There were also three teachers from the building, a parent, and that's it. Then the second [interview] happened after I got a call back within a couple of days that the superintendent would like to interview. It was just me and the superintendent. Then it was put on ice for 10 days—probably the longest 10 days of my life.

The interview process was not intimidating. Don confided, "I am rarely intimidated because there's just no reason for it. We all shop at Walmart. That's my philosophy."

Don recalled that after he accepted the position, his predecessor came by with the superintendent, and they visited for about three hours before the building keys were handed to Don. Don's assistant principal visited with him on the same day for "maybe an hour and a half and expressed his excitement." Don felt relieved when the assistant principal told him he would support him as the new school leader. Don believes that an experienced assistant principal is essential. "I can't imagine trying to run a building if you are not getting along with your assistant or they're not doing their job." Don's predecessor never contacted him after that day.

When I asked Don how the transition would be handled during his eventual replacement, he replied he had no idea. He then flipped my question and replied,

Would I replicate what the superintendent did to me? His process was for you to learn on your own because whatever he told me is his spin at twenty-five years older than me. He didn't say all that, but that's the truth. . . I didn't get hired because I was wanting to learn from the person who's the brilliant principal before me. I have a skill set that was perceived to be able to allow me to be successful.

With a somber expression, Don reflected that as the retiring principal, "I think I would have checked in more if it had been helpful to the person." Don hopes to have more procedures in place by the time he leaves the building. He explained,

In the transition, if things are going well—I don't want them to have to fix anything until Christmas. I want them to get to Thanksgiving and then their mind will start working because you're afraid to change.

#### **Case 10 – Fairview District, John Johnson**

John Johnson greeted me warmly and ushered me in through two offices to a conference room. Standing tall against the door with a big smile on his face, he extended his hand and gave me a firm handshake.

Principal at Fairview High School for five years, John began his career in education as a social studies teacher and taught for four years. He led Belmont High School for 10 years and worked in the Governor's Office on an educational grant for a year previous to becoming principal at Fairview. John's intention when he left Belmont had been to retire; however, he received calls requesting he apply for the positions with the Governor's Office and Fairview.

When asked whether he would have applied for the principal position without receiving

encouragement to do so, John responded, “I really haven’t given that much thought other than it looked like a good opportunity and so, I took advantage of it.” He jokingly stated with a grin, “My wife and I were getting ready to buy a motor home and this came along and we opted for this rather than that.”

A twelve-person committee “composed of central office personnel and faculty” from the high school interviewed him for the Fairview position. The second interview was with the superintendent. John shared that the interviews were not intimidating because of his years of experience; however, he did prepare for the interview in order “to have any success at all.” He did not worry that he would not receive the position because, “I realize[d] that they’re going to select the person that is the best fit for the campus and so, I didn’t worry about it. I worried more about how I did during the interview.”

His future plans were uncertain due to the demands of the position. “It is about 60-70 hours and at 68, it’s not the mental side. It’s just becoming more and more difficult for me to physically keep up,” he stated without emotion. “To be very honest with you, I might come to work Monday—might not,” he stated and laughed. He was considering retiring since he had met two of the three goals he made on accepting the position. He completed the construction of the new building and facilitated the transition of moving the ninth grade to the high school.

Someone new coming in, you know, can pick it up with the new ninth grade coming over, 30 to 35 new teachers coming over, rather than working another year or two and having to make that transition.... If I decide to leave, it will be my decision—not because somebody has asked me to leave.

When asked if he knew how the transition would be handled during his eventual replacement, he discussed how he hoped to be replaced. John iterated he would like to be included in the decision and aid in the transition by answering any questions the new principal might have for him.

I would hope that they would do a nationwide search so that they get the most highly qualified candidate in here that they can get.... I would certainly be honored if they [district hiring committee] asked for my input. I would be willing to give that to them and again, if the person they select during that transition wants information from me or wants to meet with me, I would certainly be available to do that.

## FINDINGS

Data analysis revealed findings in the areas of school leadership retention, hiring practices, supportive relationships and school transitions. Nine of the 10 principals were recruited by someone within the district. Seven participants were assistant principals within the district prior to becoming principals; five served in the same building, and two were from different buildings. Three participants came from outside the district to accept their principal positions. One participant was previously employed with the district.

Research shows that principals require a minimum of five years to implement reform efforts to increase student achievement (Fullan, 1997; McAdams, 1998; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). Based on information provided by the participants, the years of building leadership for

their predecessors ranged from 2 to 8 years. Three participants reported predecessors with 5 years or more experience. Demographic data of the 10 participants shows the range of 1 to 6 years leading in the building. Based on the principals' years of experience (see Table 2) in their specific buildings, they were either in the initial process of learning the school's mission or moving toward higher levels of academic performance through reform.

In Thomson's (2009) study, elementary school principals were found to stay in their leadership positions longer than high school principals. He also reported that principal turnover rates were lower for schools seen as academically successful and with a high socioeconomic status. To be considered for Title I funding, the school must show a minimum of 40% of their student population as eligible for free or reduced rate lunches. No schools in the Belmont District qualified for Title I funding; however, Alread and Harrison in the Fairview District qualified with 80% of students receiving free and reduced rate lunches. In regard to the socioeconomic status and achievement rating of the districts studied, a high turnover rate for the principals interviewed would be expected; however, participants did not consider their buildings as academically struggling. When asked if they planned to stay with the district, 9 participants responded they were not in the process of looking for another position; however, 3 participants had formulated a plan to move into a district level position or a university level position away from the principalship.

## Principal Retention

*Participants reported "overwhelming" job responsibilities that included long work days, changing accountability measures, and a lack of support.* However, principals did not report a desire to leave their positions prior to retiring or attaining a district level position, despite having a planned alternative career path or being highly aware of when they would be eligible to retire. One participant was beyond the age of retirement.

All 10 study participants commented on the excessive number of hours spent at work. Each principal listed differing challenges and supports, but all participants agreed that the time required to complete their work was a major challenge. Denver Jackson's primary concern was time management and balancing family and work; job demands left Carol Smith feeling overwhelmed. Long hours combined with extensive work responsibilities were acknowledged as factors that would eventually lead to fatigue, burnout and retirement. Todd Lawson, one of the younger principals interviewed, wondered how long he would be able to keep up the demanding pace involved in the position.

Alread elementary principal Sherry Taylor found her main stressor to be developing the support resources for her students and the lack of parent support. She aspired to hire a social worker to assist the counselor as well as provide parent education classes. Sherry Taylor felt like no one in the district really understood her school due to the large number of children in poverty. Of the schools in this study, her school had the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches.

Fairview's principal John Johnson, who had 45 years of education experience, enjoyed his position. He anticipated retiring soon since at age 68 he could not keep up with the 70-plus hour work week. He reported that the job had not been intellectually overwhelming, but for him, it was physically challenging to work the long hours without any breaks.

Two middle school principals voiced their frustrations regarding the lack of parental

support for the school. Three participants mentioned being lonely or feeling isolated; two mentioned that few individuals understood the demands of the positions they held. None of the participants complained about salary, but several were considering their retirement dates that were ten or more years away. One factor that may have lowered the attrition rate of participants was an expressed desire to stay in the geographic location combined with higher than average salaries for the region. Over half of the participants reported that the life style in the area was paramount in the decision to accept their position.

## Principal Support

*Participants reported benefits from a mentor relationship included learning their job responsibilities, good decision making, and career advancement.* Peters (2011) defined mentoring as any relationship that benefits a person in performing their job better. When I asked participants about their mentor relationships, they described a mentor as an individual with more experience who could provide job coaching. This definition is consistent with professional education organizations such as the National Association of Elementary and Secondary Principals and state teacher induction education programs. Nine principals responded that they had mentors, people who were or had been in positions to supervise them. Ed Freeman stated he had no official mentor; rather, he tried to learn from all his co-workers. Three reported their mentors were principals who had supervised them in another district; another named her principal in a previous building. Four had mentors who worked at the district level in supervisory roles.

All principals alluded to or directly stated the importance of peer support and relationships in helping them perform their duties. Using Peters' (2011) definition of a mentor, advisers, supervisors, confidants, coaches, friends or teachers can all fall under the category of mentor if they have helped the individual fulfil job responsibilities. Participants unanimously reported one of the chief values of having a mentor relationship was having a person with whom to discuss confidential information and vent to when they were upset. Best practices in mentoring programs recommended a separation of roles between instructional coaches and administrators who evaluated teachers (Hall & Simeral, 2008); however, four participants named current supervisors as their mentors.

One principal commented that she did not like to have a personal relationship with her teachers, stating that because she was their evaluator, she needed "a certain amount of distance so there's a balance there." She later stated the main benefit to having a mentor was having that trusted person, knowing that "whatever I say he's not going to hold it against me in a court of law."

Several principals relayed their fears in contacting the district office when an issue developed. Todd Lawson explained, if a complaint went past him to the district office he knew those individuals supervising would hear about it. Don Gordon reported, "You want to be 10 foot tall and bulletproof so that nothing fazes you." Principals who stated the most concern about being judged by the district office were in their first to third year of leading their buildings with few years' experience as an assistant principal. Carl Roberts, a principal new to his school but with previous experience, stated that one of the main reasons he wanted to stay in the Belmont district was the exceptional support he received from the district level administration. District supports that participants found helpful or thought would be helpful included professional

development, additional staffing resources, peer support, district level support, parent volunteers and distributive leadership roles of assistant principals and teachers.

Lee (2015) found that principals expressed feeling isolated and having no ready access to the information they needed to perform their jobs when unplanned succession occurred. Three principals commented that the job isolated them, saying that the position was “lonely.” One participant reflected, “When you move to the principalship, many times you can feel like you’re on an island, because it creates a dynamic where sometimes your assistant principals are all tight, but then the principal—you’re at another level.” Two elementary level principals referred to their teachers as their friends. They felt their affiliation as a teacher helped them bond with their teaching staff. All three female elementary principals viewed themselves as teachers despite the administrative title. Three principals reported they rely on their assistant principals for support; either the assistants co-lead with them or they trusted them to make schoolwide decisions. One principal confided that she often has a difficult time delegating responsibilities because she felt like others should not do her job.

Hall and Simeral (2008) recommended a triangle of supportive relationships for teachers that included membership in a professional learning community of peers, an instructional coach and the building administrator. They described the PLC as allowing “every member of the school community to benefit from the expertise, strengths and experience of every other member.” Cane Valley and Belmont principals all reported being part of a PLC that includes principals from only their grade level. Assistant principals attended their own PLC that was described more as a training session than as a true PLC. One principal reported attending three required PLC administrative meetings each week with the district administration; however, the meetings may not follow the intent of a true PLC. According to Hall and Simeral, for a PLC to function, all parties need to be allowed equal participatory status.

A majority of the participants benefitted from fellow principal peer support within the district and through professional associations. Three principals used email to respond to support request among other principals. Denver Jackson explained that principals send out emails to the entire principal network requesting advice; the replies go to everyone and helps them “grow” as principals.

Following a relationship triangulation model, the state required all new administrators to attend induction training for one year. The training included assignment of a mentor, formal instruction, and a peer learning experience. The majority of study participants attended the principal’s training. The two exceptions had been administrators for several years when the training became available; one of the two exceptions had helped create the program through collaboration with the state department of education and the professional administrators’ association.

Three of the 6 program attendees who mentioned the program felt their assigned mentor was beneficial; one recalled that his mentor had been his principal, but due to differences in philosophies they did not get along well. One participant reported that the program forced her and her principal/mentor to make time to talk. Another participant felt the experienced assistant principal assigned as her mentor helped her learn new duties; however, she did not retain her assigned mentor beyond the first year.

In contrast to the mandatory induction training for all new principals discussed by participants, the state offered a voluntary three-year Master Principal Academy (Leadership Academy). Several study participants had attended; most had considered attending the program. The participants who attended the program described the first year as largely class time, and

discussion followed by an assignment. In the second year of the program, the academy assigned the attendees a mentor. One principal in his third year of the program reported that he benefited from talking to all the people that he considered his mentors. Carol Smith attended all three years of the Leadership Academy. During her attendance, participants chose their own mentors. Although she chose a mentor from her district, he held no supervisory power over her. Reportedly, the voluntary Master Principal Academy provided useful mentor support for principals in their second year of the program.

### **Principals as Mentors**

*Principals acknowledged their responsibility to mentor their assistant principals.* Training the next generation of leaders in an organization continues to be central to the concept of succession planning. Mentoring of building level leadership by a principal has been a strategy used to train the next potential principal and distribute knowledge throughout the building of procedures and culture, as well as to reduce the overwhelming workload principals carry. Six of the 10 study participants reported mentoring their assistant principal(s); all six expressed hope that an assistant principal from their buildings would become the next principal. Five of the six stated that distributing leadership to the teaching faculty was important in the functioning of the school as well as in developing the teachers' leadership capabilities. All of the principals complained about the excessive hours their positions required; however, those who reported actively mentoring their assistant principal(s) expressed less frustration with their workloads than did their counterparts.

Active mentoring trends differed across grade levels. None of the three elementary principals mentioned training their assistants. One anticipated that her assistant would be principal in another building in the near future. In contrast, all three high school principals and two of the three middle school principals mentioned mentoring their assistant principals as a crucial job responsibility. All six middle and high school principals discussed the benefits of distributive leadership.

The high school principals repeatedly acknowledged that they could not do their jobs alone but found a distribution of leadership responsibilities to be essential to their positions. Their years experienced in administration (high school principals in the study had the most experience) may have influenced their views. Further, philosophical differences at the middle school and high school levels may differ from the elementary. Elementary schools traditionally are smaller and focus on meeting the whole child's needs (emotional and developmental) whereas the middle and high schools focus on career readiness. Another possible explanation could be building population sizes. One could argue that being a high school principal of a student population over 2,000 is similar to being a district superintendent; superintendents could not function if they tried to manage all their district buildings.

John Johnson was the oldest and most experienced high school principal in the study. He was proud of all the individuals he mentored who received administrative certification and became principals. Matt Turner, the Cane Valley High School principal, described his relationship with his assistant principals as one of a mentor. They came to him with all their questions, and he did his best to guide them. Carl Roberts from Belmont High School stated, "One of the greatest things that I do is to help foster growth in those assistant principals," adding that he was "fairly intentional" about helping them grow to become building leaders.

## Hiring Practices

*Participants described an in-district preference for hiring principals who had been “tapped” and/or sponsored to apply for their positions.* Myung, Loeb and Horng (2011) reported districts informally developed educators and recruited them for specific administrative positions, referring to this recruitment process as “tapping.” Nine of the 10 principals in this study reported having been actively recruited for their positions. Eight were recruited by the leaving principal or a superintendent. Three principals were encouraged and applied for their positions after the application window closed. Ed Freeman explained that “in small schools, when an opening happened at the administrative level, the superintendent had an idea of who he wanted.”

Carl Roberts received a call from the superintendent who wanted to know why he had not applied for the open position. After their conversation, Carl applied and was hired. John Johnson had just finished working on a one-year education grant at the Governor’s Office and planned to retire when he received a phone call from Fairview district administration, but was persuaded to apply for the principalship at Fairview high School. These findings are in agreement with a previous study that found three out of four principals were promoted within a district and encouraged to pursue an administrative career path (Lortie, 2009).

Pitcher, Chreim and Kisfalvi (2000) reported that when companies view themselves as successful, hiring within the company was more likely. Further, the company was more likely to hire someone with skill sets similar to those of the predecessor. Nine of the 10 principals expressed either a personal preference for hiring within the district or a belief that the district preferred hiring from within its employee pool. Two of the three high school principals expressed that hiring outside of the district is ideal, although they believed it was an unrealistic practice due to the large degree of training required.

Fulmer and Conger (2004) found businesses that placed a significant emphasis and investment in professional development for their employees viewed hiring from outside as a failure. If these findings can be extrapolated to the education field, then the professional development focus of these districts, along with their pride in academic success, may further explain the tendency to hire from within. All three of the districts studied have human resource departments with assistant superintendents in grade level curriculum that focus vast resources on professional development. Further, all participants viewed their student academic performance as excellent regardless of their NCLB benchmark status; although all but one school was on the state’s list of schools needing to improve their academic performance. Their attitude largely stemmed from being recipients of a cash reward and honored for being in the top 20% of the state’s schools.

Another variable in the hiring process was awareness of the job opening. Although all districts post their positions, districts do not post all positions, and the postings often may not be published anywhere other than the school’s website or be posted for a short duration. Sherry Taylor reported that her current position opened quickly; she learned about the opening through her principal and a principal friend.

This finding is consistent with that of Myung, Loeb and Horng (2011) who found districts that sponsored candidates for specific jobs in education did not acknowledge any type of succession management plan. They proposed the reason a formal plan had not been put into place could be due to the clash between egalitarian ideas and sponsored hiring practices. One could speculate that stakeholder pressures may be involved as well. School districts may not

want to imply to the school board or community that candidates do not have an equal opportunity to compete for the position.

### **Succession Planning**

*Principals did not report the use of a formal succession plan nor was any artifact based evidence found that would support the use of a formal written plan.* In this study, no participants acknowledged their districts as having any formal written succession plan. Internet searches for the districts' employment policies, as well as an analysis of the schools' annual improvement plans prior to the study's interviews produced nothing that could be considered a written succession plan based on Hargreaves and Fink (2006) succession best practices. Annual school plans were found to delineate professional development needs and were linked to Individual Growth Plans that could support succession at the school level. This study found only one case of a participant reporting stakeholder involvement in replacing an outgoing administrator. In preparation for hiring the new principal at Harrison Middle School, the superintendent surveyed the faculty for the traits the next principal should have to best serve their school. However, this study did find evidence of informal planning that occurred at the district administrative level through sponsorship in conjunction with the principal's awareness of the responsibility to train the next generation of leaders. Principal conviction to leadership training or mentoring appeared to differ depending on the building level.

The study revealed that a lack of communication regarding the succession practices of the districts led to qualified applicants not responding to principal openings until the participant was tapped. One participant believed that if the district wanted him in a position, they would inform him; his two previous smaller districts had informal policies. Another participant did not apply for the position of principal for an undisclosed reason, but after interviewees did not meet the committee's expectations, he was convinced by the district to apply. In addition, six of the principals responded that they would not have applied for their positions if they had not been encouraged to do so. The most consistent succession strategy (6 of 10 participants) reported by the participants in the study was to train their replacements.

## **DISCUSSION**

Given the high impact school principals have on teachers and the level of academic school success, one can argue that principal support, planning, and retention are of national concern. Norton (2002) discussed the alarming rate of principal turnover in the United States and the negative impact on schools. Kennedy (2000) found principals were leaving the profession because of the ever-increasing demands placed on them by the job, the amount of time spent working, the salary level, and a lack of community and parent support. All the principals in the current study had contemplated how long they would continue in their positions. They reported extreme stress caused by long work hours and constantly changing accountability measures as well as a lack of support by the community and/or district. All participants acknowledged their concerns that at some point they might not be able to physically or mentally perform their responsibilities due to the continual high stress level of the position. In contrast to the Kennedy (2000) study, however, none of the principals in this study expressed a desire to immediately leave their positions. Nor did any of the principals complain about salary; however, this could be due to the higher pay scale utilized in the region studied.

Lashway (2003) reported that job complexity, workload, and lack of emotional support were key contributors to stress in principals. Principals in his study responded to these challenges by putting in more hours on the job and working harder. In this study, a number of the principals reported feeling isolated from emotional support. All participants described working long hours under adversarial conditions. Lack of support from the district, community, assistant principals, teachers or parents were all viewed as stressful, as well as not having a trusted confidant with whom to discuss school matters.

Past studies have pointed to mentor relationships and professional learning communities as useful support systems (Gross, 2006; Hall & Simeral, 2008; Kram, 1985). This study found that principals benefitted from having multiple mentor relationships to learn their jobs, make good decisions and promote their careers. Three participants found support in a strong principals' PLC within the district that allowed them to ask questions of the group and share mutual experiences.

Most of the participants had an assigned mentor at the onset of their leadership careers as well as later when they attended leadership professional development. Mentors chosen by the participants were viewed as beneficial in conveying information and support. Mentors who were not mutually chosen, rather were randomly assigned, were reported to not have been of benefit to the principals. Four of the assigned mentors were direct supervisors of the principal. Hall and Simeral's (2008) research recommendations included a separation of the roles of instructional coaches for teachers and the administrators who evaluate them. If applied to leadership mentoring roles, their recommendation supports the idea that new administrators would not feel comfortable sharing information about their personal shortcomings with a stranger or with someone who is evaluating their performance. Two of the newer principals in the study expressed their reservations in calling the district when they needed support due to a fear of being judged incompetent.

The role of assistant principal as a professional learning experience was discussed by every participant. All 10 participants acknowledged dependence on their assistant principals as well as the position being a stepping stone to the principalship. Participants cited the principal they served under as an assistant principal as their mentor, and most continued to contact their mentors on a semi-regular basis. Six of the 10 participants were intentional about mentoring their assistant principals to lead in their buildings upon their departure. These data support the mentoring assistant principals as a key component in the informal succession plan used at the building level.

The data of this study affirmed the findings of Myung, Loeb and Horng (2011) that districts generally recruit educators from their own district that they groom to take a specific position. Nine of the 10 principals participating in this study were recruited for their positions. Eight of the 10 principals were indirectly recruited by the departing principal. Lortie (2009) reported similar recruitment findings for a within district recruitment bias. Pitcher, Chreim and Kisfalvi (2000) reported that when companies believe themselves to be successful, they are more likely to hire from within. This may explain the 10 districts' preferences given that most viewed themselves as successful. Although 9 of the 10 schools studied were designated as low performing schools by federal guidelines, they nonetheless were ranked academically higher than the rest of their state.

Parfitt (2017) created a survey to evaluate the essential elements being implemented in a school district. The questionnaire surveyed demographic information, the district's method of identifying leaders, profession development and mentoring, retention strategies for

administrators and cultural factors supporting succession. Riddick (2009) completed a qualitative study of three school districts through qualitative interviews with senior level administration and lower level personnel. No written documents or artifacts could be produced by the participants; however, district administrators unanimously reported that succession planning was used effectively in their district. Consistent with the Riddick (2009) findings, this study found no evidence of formal succession plans by the districts. Confusion about whether to apply for a position as well as how to apply for a promotion was reported by the participants. District materials from the internet did not reveal any specific succession planning or administrative hiring policies. Participants of the study reported the lack of understanding of the leadership hiring processes led them to forego applying for leadership positions.

## LIMITATIONS

The experiences of these 10 principals located in the southern United States may not be representative of all principals. This study's findings cannot be generalized to all school principals in the South or any other geographical areas. Results from the study, however, can contribute to the body of knowledge on principal experiences and succession.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study affirms the value of multiple principal supports including written succession plans, various mentoring relationships, personnel resources and professional development resources in supporting current principals and preparing future leaders. PLCs and peer mentoring were reported by the participants to be important supports in meeting the demands of an overwhelming position. Strong assistant principals who could handle delegated responsibilities for the principal were acknowledged as substantial supports. The delegation of task by the principal was viewed as a mentoring opportunity for teachers and assistant principals. Principals at the middle school and high school level considered mentoring their assistant principal(s) a valuable part of their job. Reflecting upon their succession as principals, participants believed the school could best be served by hiring someone from within the district, preferably someone they had mentored. Further, this study showed a district preference for hiring from within, and schools often "tapped" specific individuals for an opening even if they did not apply. Participants reported that formal succession plans were not used in the districts studied, leading to confusion about the process of attaining leadership positions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Districts can benefit from providing support for principals:

1. Provide time and access to mentor relationships through PLCs, peer collaboration time and seasoned principals.
2. Provide professional development that is designed to meet the specific communicated needs of the principal. Confidential surveys of principals and building faculty would provide information needed in planning for professional development of leadership. Surveys and demographic data can be used to point to strengths in leadership as well as weaknesses.
3. Hire additional personnel to be trained in administrative duties to support the principal

in working a reasonable number of hours per week. The use of co-principals (hiring two principals to lead one building), multiple assistant principals, instructional facilitators, and additional stipends to reward teacher leadership would help provide adequate building personnel. This would require the district to restructure employment titles and wages as well as cultural expectations.

4. Develop district wide leadership academies used as a supportive element. In the study, academies were reported to create a consistent source of reform information to the school districts throughout the state. Care should be used in utilizing academies for professional development that they do not become a substitute for completing advanced degrees. Further, academy attendance could create clone schools statewide. Leaders need to be able to analyze the specific needs of their school and work from various perceptual vantage points to implement creative solutions rather than one-size-fits-all prescribed cures.

5. Provide concrete written compliance expectations for every principal to enhance principal performance. Compliance issues need to be able to be worked into the daily routine of the school when time permits rather than on an emergency basis. Having a schedule of all upcoming data report requirements for the state and district would permit principals to complete paper based tasks during work hours that were not conflicting with meeting critical student needs.

6. Provide instructional facilitator staff to determine current trends in accountability and plan for shifts in curriculum that assist the principal in making informed decisions. Accountability measures were discussed by all principals. Further, shared responsibility for building academic scores would help reduce the pressure and frustration principals report.

7. Create a written succession plan that informs district employees of how principal successors are chosen and the supports that will be put into place during the transition. The written plan can reduce confusion about the hiring process and the amount of principal/district support offered in the transition.

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