The principal is the most important factor affecting the success or failure of schools. Earning the title of “successful principal” in America today is no easy task. Principals must assume roles of leader, facilitator, team builder, visionary, communicator, advocate, and moral agent. The person must be knowledgeable about crisis management, community affairs, and social services. The position requires someone who can get things done for children through others, meet with parents and community groups, and raise standardized test scores, while keeping the day to day operation of the school in tune (Adams, 1999; Blackman & Fenwick, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; O’Donnell, 1997).

Successful Principals Nationwide
Successful principals gather people around them who have high expectations for students and believe that all children can learn and succeed if learning barriers are removed. These principals continually encourage teachers to do what is necessary to make children successful and safeguard the learning environment from distracters, such as classroom interruptions and inflexible schedules. In a study of successful school principals, Keller (1998) found that principals of successful schools believed that curriculum and instruction were the main business of the school. Principals also communicated and enlisted support for holding high expectations for student achievement from teachers, parents, students, and the community (Borsuk, 1999; Hopkins, 1999).

The Education Trust, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the U.S. Department of Education (1999) conducted a survey of 1,200 high-poverty elementary and secondary schools identified by their states as top scoring on standardized tests. Approximately 366 rural and urban schools responded to the questionnaire. Strategies these schools used to make students successful included using standards to design curriculum, monitoring and adjusting instruction to meet student academic skill needs, and channeling fiscal resources to provide professional development for teachers in areas of need. Also, schools involved parents in school academic activities, such as Reading Day and tutoring. Parents were provided with academic activities to assist student learning at home (Borsuk, 1999; Hopkins, 1999).

An analysis of several studies (Bauer, 1997; Carter, 2000; Purkey & Smith, 1983) of high-performing, high-poverty schools revealed common methods for achieving success. These included having:

- a shared vision and unity of purpose for the school and community;
- strong leadership committed to student success;
- caring and competent teachers;
- collaborative planning and shared decision-making;
- a positive school climate;
- high expectations and clear, measurable goals;
- a budget focused on teacher development and therefore, student achievement;
- rigorous, integrated curriculum, especially in reading and math; and
- recognition of parents as partners in student learning.

Texas–Mexico Border Principals
Principals on the Texas–Mexico border provide educational services to many students of high poverty who
Research Question

What strategies do South Texas principals use to make high-poverty schools high performing?

Procedures

Study participants consisted of 29 female and 13 male principals with three to 32 years of experience in the district and with one to 21 years of experience as principals in the current assignment. The group was comprised of eight Anglo Americans and 34 Hispanic Americans. All the participants had prior experience as teachers and 21 had experience as assistant principals before their promotion to principal.

The researchers conducted a literature review of successful principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools and developed a questionnaire from information gathered. The questionnaire was field tested in March 2001 with students in the university educational administration superintendent program and modified using student suggestions for greater clarity. Permission to conduct the study was received from the Texas A&M International University Institutional Review Board in March 2001. In April 2001, the 10-item questionnaire was mailed to 162 school principals in South Texas whose schools earned exemplary or recognized status consecutively between 1998 and 2000.

Data for the 1999-2000 school year was analyzed. Schools represented in the study enrolled from 288 to 1900 students with ethnicities ranging from 81.5% to 100% Hispanic, 0% to 17% Anglo, and 0% to 14% Black. Economically disadvantaged students comprised 39.7% to 100% of student enrollment. The mobility rate for students in the 1999-2000 school year ranged from 7.7% to 32.9%. Questionnaire data from 34 elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools was analyzed.

Study Results

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

Question 1: Rank the following items in order of importance in school success: school vision and mission, curriculum alignment, teacher expertise, teambuilding, parent involvement and shared decision making. Respondents as a group ranked the establishment of a shared school vision and mission as most important for school success.

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

Question 3: What practices do you use to increase student attendance or keep students in school? Incentives for student attendance and achievement, rewards, and recognition were the most used methods of increasing student attendance in school. Rewards and incentives included attendance bumper stickers, school-wide recognition via school intercom, and trips to fast food establishments at the expense of the school, to name a few.

Question 4: How do you meet the needs of limited English proficient students? Participants indicated that limited English proficient students are placed in a bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom with a certified teacher skilled in diagnosing and adjusting instruction to meet the language needs of students.

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

Question 6: How do you work with migrant students? Respondents indicated that schools must have a bilingual/ESL certified teacher to work one-on-one with migrant students. Peer tutoring was also used to help migrant students acquire English skills.

Question 7: How do you and your staff meet the needs of students that enter your school with a history of low achievement? Respondents indicated that proper academic placement and the use of school support programs designed to target individual student academic needs areas were essential.

Question 8: What do you and your staff do when you encounter teachers who do not share the high achievement mission of the school? Consistently, participants stated that campus principals and team leaders work with teachers to change negative attitudes by including them in campus projects and activities. If negative attitudes about expectations for student achievement did not change, the teacher was encouraged to seek employment elsewhere.

Question 9: What do you look for when recruiting new teachers? Principals and team leaders look for experienced teachers willing to work hard and seek professional development as needed.

Question 10: If you were to serve as a mentor for a new principal of a low-performing school in a high-poverty area of South Texas, who wants to make that school high performing like your school, what basic suggestions would you recommend to start the new principal on a path to school success? Respondents offered the following suggestions: set a vision and mission for student success and sell the vision and mission to teachers, students, and parents; get to know all the students and their individual academic needs; and actively seek solutions to student problems. Principals should foster the belief that “we are all in this together.” Lastly, new principals and their staffs should celebrate even the smallest student successes as they occur.
Conclusion

Like all successful principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools, study participants believed that the establishment and belief in a common vision and mission for student success was essential. Continuous assessment of student progress and needs was essential to improving the academic achievement of all students. Team building and developing a “family” atmosphere on campus were essential for teacher and student motivation to achieve.

Implications for Future Research

Future research on the leadership characteristics of border principals might be expanded to include a study of the characteristics of superintendents of high-performing, high-poverty schools in South Texas and their expectations for principals. Studies of programs principals use to assist the academic achievement of Spanish-language-dominant students might also be explored.

References


