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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Study Reflects Maine Principals' Roles and Responsibilities

ORONO, Maine -- The average Maine school principal supervises 40 staff members, is responsible for 355 students, and spends the day dealing with manifold management and monitoring duties. Maine's principals are seasoned teachers and administrators who, overall, feel effective in their jobs, according to a recent study from the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. The greatest challenge is finding a balance between their professional and personal lives, and dealing with the constraints of the education hierarchy.

The study, conducted by UMaine Educational Leadership Professors Gordon Donaldson and Charles Hausman, lends insight into the high turnover in principalships in Maine and nationwide, and the difficulty in filling these positions with qualified people.

Nationally, there is overwhelming consensus that the principal's job is more professionally challenging and personally taxing than ever before, and Maine is no exception, according to Donaldson and Hausman. Their report, "Maine Principals and Their Work Lives: A Study of the Maine School Principalship," is the beginning of long-range data collection to better prepare and assist principals as educational leaders.

The report was compiled from a survey, which was sent to principals of all Maine public and approved private schools serving students between kindergarten and grade 12. Sixty-three percent, or 434 of the 689 surveys, were returned. Reflecting the state's demographics and educational characteristics, respondents serve schools representing more than 40 different grade configurations, and the majority described the schools where they attained most of their experience as rural. Forty-five of the principals supervised more than one school building, in most cases, located in different towns, and 42 were teachers as well as administrators.

The principals lead schools that vary so widely in grade configuration, enrollment, number of staff and administrative structure that it may be inappropriate to think of the Maine principalship as a single type of role or job, the report points out. In addition to administrative duties, 42 of the responding principals were also teachers.

No survey of Maine principals of this magnitude has been done before, according to Donaldson. "With follow-up surveys every two years, we will soon have a better grasp on the factors that determine principals' longevity in their jobs and that shape their ability to be successful," he says.

Although the average tenure for Maine principals is eight and a half years, nearly 27 percent -- one in four -- have been in their current positions for two years or less. Principals play a pivotal role in school change and effectiveness, notes Hausman. "Short-term tenure makes long-range planning almost impossible," he says.

The survey response is testimony to the vast number of roles and responsibilities principals must handle regularly, according to the researchers. From a list of 41 typical principal activities, respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spend and how much success they experience in each activity, as well as the clarity of exceptions for their involvement and performance. As a group, the principals reported being engaged in 22 of the activities "often" or "very often," reflecting the vast number of roles and responsibilities that are part of the job. The most frequently reported activities were running faculty meeting, responding to the needs of teachers, supervising and evaluating teachers, resolving student problems, budget preparation and consulting with teachers about students.

When the activity listing was clustered into seven areas of related responsibilities, principals reported spending more time on student management, personnel management and interactions with the education hierarchy than on professional development, instructional leadership and public relations.

Although principals expressed a strong sense of efficiency in all areas of their work, the survey indicates they tend to spend more time in those activities in which they feel the most successful and where their roles and expectations are most clearly defined. Overall, student management ranks highest both in time spent and success experienced. Only 37 percent of the principals, most at the high school level, have an assistant principal to help with student issues.

The concern, Donaldson and Hausman say, is with such a fragmented role and principals doing so many different jobs, who is going to lead the critical educational reform initiatives?

Principals are often caught in the middle of different demands and directions from parents, teachers, school boards and superintendents, resulting in ambiguity about goals and standards, and changing priorities, according to the researchers. Many of the principals reported feeling hindered in their jobs by school rules and policies, implying that the bureaucracy of the school organization can be an obstacle to effectiveness.

The supervisory and management responsibilities of principals continue to grow as the number of administrative positions decline in Maine and nationally. For instance, a 1996 report from the UMaine Center for Research and Evaluation shows that school administrators supervise twice as many employees as a supervisor in the manufacturing sector. The number of Maine school administrative jobs is down 23 percent from 1991.

With an average work week of 56 hours in a high-stress position, principals struggle to find a balance between their jobs and families. Sixty-two percent are directly responsible for the care of children, and 15 percent are directly responsible for the care of parents or other relatives. Time remaining for their own personal care, recreation and hobbies averages between one and six hours per week.

The information provided in the initial survey and those to follow will be extremely helpful in better understanding the reasons behind the high turnover and low number of people aspiring to be principals, especially at the high school level, according to Richard Tyler, executive director of the Maine Principals' Association. "The survey is providing long-needed hard data on the many facets and pressures of the job," he said.

Other data about Maine school principals gleaned from the survey:

- Nearly 91 percent are 41 or older with more than 12 years of both teaching and administrative experience.
- More than 70 percent have earned credits beyond a master's degree and are actively engaged in professional development activities; however, only 3.7 percent have earned a doctorate, compared with 9.3 percent nationally.
- The most helpful people in their jobs are secretaries, teachers and spouses; least helpful are school boards and universities/professors.
- The majority generally regard themselves as making positive impacts in their work and a positive difference for students, and report high levels of community support.

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