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Effective School Leadership in High-Performing High-Poverty Elementary Schools in South Texas

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ABSTRACT

A mixed-research case study was conducted to identify effective school characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools. Four High-Performing Reward schools in South Texas were selected to study. An eleven effective school characteristics model including processes was developed from the effective school research literature as the framework for the study. Onsite data collection from each school included a staff survey and focus group session, parent survey and focus group session, and principal interview. The study findings supported the eleven effective school characteristics model.

An area of improvement in school application identified among these high-performing schools was Leadership. School staff and parent perceptions of the processes for effective Leadership were analyzed. School staff perceptions ranked Leadership mid-level in essentiality and application among the eleven characteristics. However, staff and parent focus groups strongly supported the principals' leadership qualities; although, the principals' leadership styles varied. Two areas of improvement identified were in improvement of instruction and student discipline. The study's findings in the area of Leadership as an effective school characteristic support understanding "Leadership" as a varying ingredient integrated and mutually interactive with school context where leadership changes due to the school context and/or the school context changes due to the leadership.

Keywords: *Effective Schools, Title 1 Schools, Leadership, High-Poverty Schools*

INTRODUCTION

Texas includes the second highest proportion of Title 1 schools in the United States, and Region One, an educational region in South Texas, includes the highest proportion of Title 1 schools among Texas twenty educational regions (United States Department of Education, 2017). High-poverty schools are well documented in school research to face greater challenges in reaching student high academic performance (*American Psychological Association, Education and SES Factsheet*, 2017; Jensen, 2009; Hoschild, 2003). Title 1 schools are high-poverty schools by definition (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education [USDOE], 2015), and those that reach high student academic achievement are ultimate models of high-performing high-poverty effective schools.

A study with the purpose to identify effective school characteristics, processes and strategies implemented in high-performing Title 1 schools in Region One was designed and completed—*Effective School Practices In Title I Schools Exceeding Educational Expectations (E3)* (Padilla, Guerra, & Zamora, 2019). Leadership was one characteristic identified and supported by the study necessary for effective schools. While leadership has been consistently found to be a distinctive characteristic in effective school

models (Padilla, et al., 2019), understanding the processes involved in leadership is critical. This writing reports the findings of the completed study related to Leadership.

BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

Four Title 1 schools in Region One were selected after applying a rigorous selection process. The four schools were designated as “High-Performing” Reward Schools by Texas in 2015-16 (Texas Education Agency, 2016a), received other state academic distinctions, had an enrollment of at least a 400 students, and did not include more than the 7.7% state average of students who qualified for Gifted and Talented Programs (Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Report 2015-16 State Profile) were selected for the study. Analysis showed these four “High-Performing Reward schools were in the top 20% academically-achieving schools among all schools in Texas (Texas Education Agency Texas, 2016b). So, not only were these high-performing Title 1 schools, they were high-achieving among all Texas schools. The four schools selected were: Lincoln Elementary, Guerra Elementary, San Carlos Elementary, Anne L. McGee Elementary, and RC Flores-Mark A. Zapata Elementary—all in the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District. These schools were assigned random codes during the data collection process to ensure strict confidentiality (Padilla et al., 2019).

To guide the study, an effective school model framework consisting of eleven characteristics was developed from 100 effective school characteristics models found in the research literature. The eleven characteristics and their rates of inclusion in these models are in Table 1 (Padilla et al., 2019).

Table 1: Eleven Effective School Characteristics

Characteristic	Percent Identified Across All Found Models
Culture	86%
Leadership	79%
Instruction	75%
Improvement	71%
Home and Community Relations	66%
Curriculum	56%
Environment	60%
Professional Development	41%
Vision/Mission	41%
Resources	27%
Staff	24%
Other	14%
Total Set of School Effective Models Found:	100

“Other” was not included in the study’s model because it reflected numerous factors each found very limited in the models analyzed. It is notable that “Leadership” was the second most frequent characteristic found among the 100 models analyzed, second only to “Culture.”

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS STUDY: LEADERSHIP

The effective school characteristics study was a mixed-methods case study that included school staff and parents completing surveys and focus group sessions (Padilla et al., 2019). The findings related to Leadership are the focus of this writing.

School Staff Survey Results

Processes defining each of the eleven effective school characteristics were derived and defined from the same set of 100 effective school characteristic models (Padilla et al., 2019). Participants responded to prompts indicating the essentiality of each characteristic process to school effectiveness and its corresponding level of application at their school. Essentiality was defined as how important and essential the process was to producing maximum success for all students. Application was defined as how strongly and accurately the process was applied at their school.

The scale used was from zero to four, representing 0-Not Applicable, 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, and 4-Strongly Agree. The responses to the processes for each characteristic were averaged to obtain a total rating for the characteristic. The total surveys completed were 130 (83.9% participation rate), with 89.2% representing teachers (Padilla et al., 2019). Table 2 shows “Leadership” earned the seventh highest essential total average and the eighth highest applied total average among the eleven characteristics. More importantly, “Leadership” was the characteristic with the third greatest negative difference between essentiality and application total averages, but considerably less than “Parent Relations” which showed the greatest difference.

Table 2: Essentiality, Application and Differences between Essentiality and Application of the Eleven Characteristics of School Effectiveness by School and Total

Characteristic	Essentiality of the Characteristics to School Effectiveness*					Application of the Characteristics to School Effectiveness*					Difference
	1	2	3	4	Total	1	2	3	4	Total	
Instruction	3.65	3.85	3.94	3.86	3.84	3.40	3.71	3.88	3.80	3.72	0.12
Staff	3.66	3.84	3.95	3.80	3.82	3.42	3.60	3.89	3.55	3.62	0.20
Environment	3.62	3.88	3.95	3.77	3.82	3.43	3.68	3.88	3.54	3.64	0.18
Professional Development	3.68	3.85	3.93	3.78	3.82	3.40	3.57	3.76	3.56	3.58	0.24
Curriculum	3.61	3.86	3.93	3.78	3.81	3.36	3.60	3.89	3.63	3.64	0.17
Resources	3.63	3.85	3.95	3.73	3.80	3.46	3.64	3.82	3.47	3.61	0.19
Leadership	3.59	3.86	3.95	3.67	3.78	3.28	3.65	3.87	3.38	3.56	0.22
Improvement	3.51	3.86	3.85	3.77	3.77	3.43	3.80	3.79	3.73	3.71	0.06
Culture	3.58	3.78	3.87	3.62	3.72	3.32	3.52	3.73	3.38	3.49	0.23
Parent Relations	3.57	3.70	3.88	3.57	3.69	2.95	3.12	3.50	3.09	3.18	0.51
Vision	3.44	3.77	3.84	3.49	3.65	3.44	3.77	3.84	3.49	3.65	0.00

Note: *The highest average possible was 4.00-Strongly Agree.

The study’s results demonstrate that although Leadership was the second highest characteristic commonly found in a set of 100 effective school characteristics models, it was perceived as the seventh highest essential and the eighth highest applied characteristic among the eleven effective school characteristics model utilized in this study of four high-performing, high-poverty schools. All eleven characteristics received levels of essentiality and school application between the “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” levels. No characteristic received a “Not Applicable,” “Strongly Disagree,” or “Disagree” level.

School Staff Leadership Processes Results

Leadership included 27 processes. School staff rated the essentiality of each Leadership process and its application at the school. These ratings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Leadership Processes: Perceptions of Essentiality and School Application

Leadership Process	Essentiality	Application	Difference
The school principal is passionate about achieving maximum success for all students and goal-oriented.	3.84	3.91	-0.07
The school principal is visible in classrooms and hallways virtually every school day.	3.74	3.84	-0.11
The principal participates and supports improvement of instruction.	3.71	3.80	-0.10
The principal is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly and efficiently.	3.67	3.84	-0.16
The principal is student-focused and places the learning needs of students ahead of other interests.	3.66	3.78	-0.12
The school principal challenges staff members to innovate and improve teaching and learning.	3.66	3.81	-0.15
The principal knows what's going on in my classroom.	3.65	3.82	-0.17
The principal participates and supports the development of the school's curriculum.	3.65	3.78	-0.13
The school principal analyzes information from many sources and uses it to make effective decisions.	3.65	3.80	-0.16
The school principal promotes a culture of ongoing professional development in the school.	3.64	3.79	-0.15
The principal communicates openly about important information to me in a timely and effective manner.	3.64	3.81	-0.18
The school principal is an effective leader.	3.63	3.82	-0.19
The school principal is an innovative problem solver who can identify and resolve issues that come from parents, students, and staff members.	3.59	3.76	-0.17
The school principal inspires school staff, students, parents, and community members to commit to achieving maximum success for all students.	3.58	3.80	-0.22
The school principal provides tremendous support to me in helping all students successfully learn in the classroom.	3.57	3.78	-0.21
The school principal encourages collaboration among school staff, parents, students, and community members.	3.56	3.82	-0.26
The school principal is a lifelong learner.	3.55	3.77	-0.22
The principal encourages teachers, staff, students, and parents to assume leadership responsibilities in the school.	3.55	3.77	-0.22
The school principal is flexible and effective in dealing with change.	3.50	3.77	-0.27
The principal gives me useful feedback about my teaching in a positive manner.	3.49	3.77	-0.28
The school principal communicates effectively and regularly with parents and community members.	3.47	3.74	-0.27
The school principal treats all students, parents, staff, and community members with respect.	3.46	3.77	-0.31
The school principal interacts well with children in a variety of situations.	3.46	3.72	-0.27
The school principal demonstrates caring for staff members, students, and parents.	3.42	3.69	-0.26
The school principal actively seeks to recruit and retain a diverse staff.	3.40	3.71	-0.31
The principal is fair in dealing with teachers, students, and parents.	3.34	3.66	-0.32
The principal is open to new ideas that improve the school no matter who suggests them.	3.34	3.67	-0.33
Total Average:	3.57	3.78	-0.21

Three of the top four processes in essentiality are also in the top four in application: passionate for maximizing the success of all students, visibility, and effective school management. While improvement

of instruction is the third highest essential process, it is tied for ninth highest in application. The three lowest applied processes include caring, fairness, and openness to new ideas. These same processes were among the four lowest in essentiality.

School Staff Focus Groups Results

Group focus sessions for professional school staff were conducted at each school with 42 total staff members participating. During these sessions, school staff identified school strengths and challenges (Padilla et al., 2019). School staff focus groups identified various effective qualities in their principals: strong, tough cookie, teach teachers, personally supportive, professionally supportive, flexible, data focused, open door policy, competitive, good communication skills, motivating, has best interest of students, consistent, welcoming, high expectations, professionally respectful, team-oriented, honest, problem solver, and effectiveness in selecting staff. While each school provided different qualities for the principal, the more consistent qualities were supportive, strong, competitive, and high expectations. Competitive was emphasized very strongly in the focus group discussions. One school focus group strongly suggested the principal should be “cloned” because she was so effective. This was the same school that described the principal as a “tough cookie.” Each school’s staff focus group strongly stated that school leadership had a “huge, huge, huge” impact on school effectiveness.

Staff focus groups also identified areas of improvement for school leadership. Again, there were striking differences in the discussions among the three schools. However, two schools suggested improving student discipline which was too “lenient” or because the principal was “too nice.” However, one school noted this issue may be due to district rules and expectations, rather than principal choice.

Parent Focus Group Sessions: Leadership Results

Forty-four parents from the four schools participated in the parent focus group sessions (Padilla et al., 2019). The parents of each school focus group shared very positive comments about the school principal: humble, caring, high expectations, tough, remembers former students, passionate, supportive, problem solver, responsive, motherly, collaborative, and respectful. One parent stated:

I went through something really hard this past year. My husband got really sick. He got a stroke, so I wasn't at home for seven weeks and in those seven weeks, the first day I came to tell the principal that my daughter will not be able to come to school, that I didn't have anyone to bring her since I was at the hospital the entire time. The moment I told her that she said "We will be there for you." My daughter couldn't concentrate, obviously, seeing her dad this way. He was in a coma for four weeks, so I feel that in another school they wouldn't have been there for me like this.... I thought she wasn't going to pass to the next grade.... The principal would ask me how my husband was doing; to this day, she sees me and asks how he is doing. When they have the fifth grade graduation, he will be here, walking. He will be here. That is something that goes beyond expectation for them to be worried about my husband so much. I don't believe they would do that anywhere else. She is worried about not only the children but the parents as well.

There was great consistency among the parent focus groups of the four schools in their positive comments about the principal with other similar tales shared as the one above.

FINDINGS

Results of the study of four High-Performing Title 1 schools supported an eleven characteristic model of effective schools. Each characteristic included processes that operationally defined the characteristic. Among these characteristics, school staff ranked Leadership seventh in essentiality and eighth in application among the eleven effective school characteristics. This demonstrates a striking difference between the association of leadership with school effectiveness found among effective school models, second highest, and its perceptions by the study's participants, seventh highest in essentiality. Nevertheless, it must be noted that all characteristics received levels between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Not one single shade of "Disagreement" was indicated for any one characteristic. Thus, participant perceptions ranged between "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" that all eleven characteristics were essential to their school effectiveness and were being applied in their schools.

Of the 27 processes that comprised the Leadership characteristic, staff perceived all the processes higher in application than essentiality. Thus, the school staff perceived school leaders as applying each process effectively. School staff perceived the leaders as passionate for maximizing the success of all students, highly visible in the classrooms, and providing effective school management which were among the most essential and most applied Leadership processes. Thus, school staff perceived the principals applying the most essential Leadership processes effectively. However, the Leadership process of improvement of instruction was the third highest essential process, but very low in application, ranked ninth. The three lowest processes were caring, fairness, and openness to new ideas. Nevertheless and similarly as in the total average levels for characteristics, all 27 processes received "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" levels in essentiality and application, so all processes were considered essential to school effectiveness and applied by the schools.

In school focus groups, staff and parents spoke highly about the principals identifying quality attributes of which the most consistent among the schools were: strong, tough cookie, supportive, competitive, and having high expectations. Since these were four of the top schools in the district, the school staff openly discussed their intent to compete strongly and stay on top. Moreover, each school's staff focus group stated that school leadership had a tremendous impact on the school's effectiveness. Nevertheless, how each staff focus group described its principal was startlingly different, from "tough cookie" to "too nice," suggesting that while there are consistent leadership qualities, effective principal styles may vary, although competitive stands out as a necessary quality.

School parent focus group sessions yielded very positive comments about the school principals. Several parents shared personal stories about how the principal made a difference in their family's life, not just in their child's life and education. While parents acknowledged the principals were "tough," they recognized the need for that attribute to ensure the school's effectiveness and their children's success. When the subject of the principal was introduced with parents in the focus groups, the parents became noticeably positive and very willing to share. Researchers could feel warm energy rise in the room.

DISCUSSION

There is no doubt that "leadership matters" (Hackman & Wageman, 2007) in schools as noted by the many leadership models that include it as a necessary characteristic for effective leaders. This study of effective Title 1 schools in the Texas Region One educational area suggests that other effective school characteristics are more essential and applied than Leadership. Certainly, the principal in a school matters

in order to produce effectiveness, but in the hierarchy of things that matter in effective schools, other things may matter more. However, when parents and staff described their principals, there was much more praise and value assigned to the principal's leadership. The findings suggest the impact of leadership on an individual's job, life, child, or family may be strikingly greater than when perceived by the whole group or among a set of characteristics. Thus, a principal's leadership may be "more than the sum of its constituent parts" (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2010, p. 30) or processes. Additionally, as a whole and when staff, parents, or students need it most, and it is there for them, then school leadership matters most and towers over all other effective school characteristics in essentiality.

Effective schools can be considered a "complex mixture" (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2010, p. 30) of the eleven characteristics supported by the study (Padilla, et al., 2019). Leadership can also be considered a complex mixture of the 27 processes defined by the formula found in this study. However, the formula of leadership or leadership style may vary across different effective schools, as noted in this study. Situational leadership theory supports that successful leadership style is dependent on the situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), or that leadership style must adjust to the situation. This study found the leadership style of the principals was consistent within each principal, but varied across the four principals. This may suggest the situation adjusts to the leader's style as well. Thus, the principal's leadership style adjusts to the situation or the situation adjusts to the principal's leadership style. Moreover, these adjustments may coexist so that both the principal's leadership style and situation mutually adjust to each other until the right fit is found and will continue to mutually adjust as needed because style and situation may change over time. In effect, leadership style and situation form a mutually inclusive, integrated and continuous interactive system. Thus, as an example in the study, a school's staff described their principal as a "tough cookie," yet, suggested cloning her because her leadership style supported the school's effectiveness. In this school, the school situation adjusted more to the leadership style and even commended the principal's "tough" leadership style. Thus, effective schools may include strikingly different principal leadership styles. But, the principal's leadership style and the school's context, or situation, have interacted and mutually adjusted to achieve school effectiveness and will continue to mutually adjust to ensure continued high performance.

The study found staff perceived schools applying the Leadership processes higher than their essentiality levels. This finding supports the principals were doing an exceptional job in providing school leadership. However, the perception in the application of improvement in instruction by the principal was relatively low among the 27 total processes, and two schools shared the principal needed to enforce stronger student discipline. It is important for these schools to recognize, accept, analyze, and begin to improve application of this Leadership process.

School staff identified Leadership as a characteristic as having a "huge, huge, huge" impact on school effectiveness. Very importantly, both staff and parents openly shared the quality attributes of the principals and how they have made a difference in student lives, education, and even in their families' lives. Given the stories shared by the parents and the high success of these effective Title 1 schools, leadership definitely does matter.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is a long-running, consistent effective school characteristic in the literature (Lezotte, 1991). In this effective schools study, staff in the four Title 1 schools perceived its essentiality and application to be at the mid-level among the eleven effective school characteristics. Nonetheless, the

levels were high in the “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” range for both aspects. Analyzing Leadership processes highlights what a school is doing well and what it needs to improve to ensure even greater quality leadership.

When directly listening to how the school principal impacts, not only school effectiveness, but the lives of staff, parents, and students, the strong conclusion that leadership matters in schools rises beyond its mid-level perception. This study supports the need for high quality leadership in order to produce school effectiveness, and its style variability is determined by the integrated and mutually interactive relationship between the leader and the situation.

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