

Rural and Small School Principal Candidates: Perspectives of Hiring Superintendents

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This article reports the results of an inquiry into the dynamics of principal selection in rural school districts in two mid-American states with high numbers of rural schools. The study focuses on two questions: (1) are rural school districts experiencing a shortage of qualified applicants for vacant principal's positions; and (2) what professional and personal characteristics do superintendents seek in selecting principals for rural schools? Data for the study were collected through a review of the relevant research literature and interviews with superintendents of rural school districts. The study confirmed that rural school districts in these two states are in fact not experiencing a shortage of qualified principal applicants and delineates specific professional and personal characteristics superintendents seek in the principals who lead rural schools.

Introduction

It has long been assumed that American public schools face a critical shortage of quality candidates for principal positions (Yerkes & Gauglianone, 1998; National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 2000; Fenwick & Pierce, 2001; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Whitaker, 2001). The Educational Research Services (1998; 2000) anticipates a shortage of qualified applicants for principal positions as more than 30 percent of principals and assistant principals retire over the next decade and enrollments in elementary and middle schools continue to grow. A recent study by Quinn (2002) discovered shortages of principal candidates in urban, suburban and rural schools. Fink and Brayman (2006) attribute the coming shortage of principal candidates to the retirement of aging principals, increased principal mobility, and the standardization agenda which "undermine the capacity of incoming and outgoing principals to lead their schools (p. 83)." Finally, Young, Peterson, and Short (2002) note a decline in the number of qualified candidates willing to take on the task of leading schools. These studies suggest that at a time when public schools in the United States need new and dynamic leadership, finding those leaders will become increasingly difficult.

Review of the literature

Explanations for the decline in the number and quality principal candidates and even the question of whether or not a shortage exists have been the focus of an extensive body of recent research. Here we review relevant research in several areas: the nature of the applicant pool for principal positions; incentives and disincentives for educators to seek

a principal's position; the attractiveness of a principal's position as career goal for teachers; and the multiplicity of factors influencing the supply of applicants for vacant principal positions. What we have come to understand is that the issue is more complex than it appears at first glance.

The principal applicant pool

Teachers make up the largest pool of potential principal applicants and understanding the reason why teachers do or do not apply for vacant principal's positions is vital. Jordan, McCauley, and Commeaux (1998) surveyed Louisiana teachers who held principal's credentials to determine their attitudes toward pursuing an administrative position. Their findings indicated that 80% of teachers who already held an administrative certificate were not interested in becoming a principal. Respondents identified the following as reasons for not pursuing an administrative career: the increasing complexity and constraints of the principal's job; excessive stress associated with the job; a perceived lack of support for doing a good job; inadequate salaries; long hours associated with requirements of the job; and the impact of the job on the principal's family life. Studies in other states (Adams, 1999; Malone, Sharp, & Thompson, 2000) produced similar results while Hammond, Muffs, and Sciascia (2001) found a perception among aspiring principals in New York state that school district hiring practices exhibited bias based on the applicant's gender and ethnicity. This perception discouraged female applicants of color from pursuing a principal's position.

Winter, Rinehart, and Munoz (2001) surveyed teachers holding principal certificates in a large Midwestern school district. Included in the survey were current assistant principals and other administrative-workers such as school

counselors and coordinators. Of these surveyed only currently serving assistant principals held positive attitudes toward the principal's job. Other educators were more ambivalent, citing factors such as the loss of tenure; a negative impact on family life; the loss of vacation time; heightened stress; and satisfaction with their current position as reasons not to seek a principal's position. On the positive side, potential principal applicants who were interested in the principalship exhibited a higher degree of confidence in their ability to perform well in a principal's position than did those who were less interested in the job. Both teachers interested and not interested in pursuing a principal's position agreed that the principalship offered more power than did the classroom; provided better opportunities for professional and personal growth; and was more financially rewarding (Winter, Rinehart, & Munoz, 2001).

Not all potential principal applicants are discouraged by the downside of an administrative career. Cooley and Shen (1999) identified several factors that motivated teachers to seek administrative positions. Among the most important of these were the relationship among the board, administrators, and teachers; a salary commensurate with responsibilities; community support for administrators; the quality of life in the community (housing costs, cultural opportunities, recreation); and the impact of the position on the principal's home life. Cooley & Shen concluded "...aside from salary, organizational relationships...affect a teacher's willingness to seek an administrative position in a particular district" (1999, p. 79).

In a subsequent study of the factors influencing applications for urban principalships, Cooley and Shen (2000) found differences of opinion between urban principals and teachers. Both urban groups were in agreement that board, administrator, teacher relationships, emotional aspects of the job (stress, boredom, burnout), impact of the position on home life, a salary commensurate with responsibility, poor working conditions, and lack of support for administrators were among the 10 most important factors influencing their decision to apply for a principal's position. But urban teachers also perceived environmental factors such as personal safety, reputation of the superintendent, quality of life in the community, and community support as important. Urban principals, on the other hand, were less concerned about environmental factors but ranked factors related to compensation and the nature of the job such as stress of the position, lack of respect for educators, reputation of the district, and school board micromanagement as significant. The researchers concluded that the number of variables influencing an individual's decision to apply for an urban principalship were too complex to identify any single factor as controlling (Cooley & Shen, 2000). Finally, Malone, Sharp, and Thompson (2000) reported that intrinsic motives also played a part in an individual's decision to become a principal. The principal's office was perceived as a position from which one could "make a difference in the lives of kids" and

"influence the direction their schools were taking" (quoted in Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005, p. 761). A teacher's decision to pursue or decline an administrative position appears to be influenced by an unexpectedly complex mix of organizational, environmental, and personal factors.

Incentives and disincentives to apply for a principal's position

Howley, Adrianairo and Perry (2005) have organized the complex factors impacting teachers' decisions to pursue a principal's position into two broad categories which they label "incentives" and "disincentives." *Disincentives* to applying for a principal's job include such things as the growing complexity of the position; a high level of stress; a perceived lack of support from other members of the educational community for doing a good job; salary levels inadequate for responsibility; long hours associated with the job; the negative impact of the principal's job on family life; and hiring practices that privilege some applicants over others. The *incentives* for becoming a principal include such things as the opportunity to make a difference for students; the ability to influence the direction of the school; the challenge of increased responsibility; the opportunity to implement new ideas; and financial advantages. Calculating the relative importance of incentives and disincentives seems to be a major part of an individual's decision to seek or not to seek a principalship.

The principalship as a desirable career goal

For all the challenges associated with the role, there are many teachers who still consider the principalship to be a significant career goal. How then do teachers who are most likely to become principals differ from those who are not? Howley and colleagues (2005) discovered that the critical factors differentiating these two groups of teachers were years of experience as a teacher, cosmopolitan versus localist attitudes, certification as an administrator, and perceived importance of encouragement from significant school leaders. Teachers with fewer years of experience, who held more cosmopolitan values, who were already certified as administrators, and who perceived the encouragement of school leaders as important were more likely to believe that the incentives to pursue the principalship overbore the disincentives. In contrast, teachers who tended to see the disincentives of the job as determinant tended to have more years of experience, to hold more localist values, and to place less importance on the encouragement of school leaders. More males than females tend to value the incentives presented by the principal's position over the disincentives (Howley et. al., 2005). There would appear to be significant differences in the experience and values of teacher who see the principalship as a desirable career goal and those (perhaps in the majority) who do not.

A situation in which the disincentives associated with the principalship outweigh the incentives means that for a large number of teachers becoming a principal is no longer a significant career goal. If the majority of teachers do not see the principalship as a valued career goal but rather as an undesirable task undertaken by persons different from themselves, the tendency to discredit the contributions principals make to the success of the school organization will be great. "It is not too far-fetched, then," write Howley et. al., "to imagine a typical situation in which relatively inexperienced educators, responding to incentives that other educators disavow, assume administrative positions in which they are supposed to provide guidance to more experienced, but also more skeptical and self-interested colleagues" (2005, p. 773). The probability that school bureaucracies that are theoretically designed to link increasing experience with increased responsibility will function effectively if at all is problematic.

A multi-state view

Recently a group of researchers working under the auspices of the Wallace Foundation examined the reality of the principal shortage (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003). Participants in the study included superintendents, human resource directors, and other administrators in 83 public school districts located in 10 metropolitan regions of the United States. The regions included nine cities and their surrounding counties and one state: Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Orlando, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Diego, Santa Clara, and the state of New Mexico. Results of the study shed additional light on the question of a shortage of qualified principal applicants.

The data revealed that most public school districts were receiving an average of 17 applicants for each vacant principal position. The number of applications received represented a decline of about two applicants per position over the previous seven years but were adequate for the districts involved. However, disparities in the distribution of applicants among districts and schools were significant. Applicants appeared to purposefully avoid some districts altogether and certain schools within a district while eagerly seeking positions in other districts and schools. Moreover, the disparities in application numbers between desirable and less desirable districts and schools appeared to be growing. Several factors seemed to explain the disparities in applications. These factors included high levels of poverty in the districts and schools, high concentrations of poor or minority students, low per pupil expenditures, and low principal salaries. Principal applicants selectively avoided the more challenging leadership positions while actively seeking positions in districts and schools where working conditions were more favorable.

Roza and colleagues concluded that school districts and schools with difficulty attracting qualified applicants constituted a "distribution problem" that affected only a

small number all districts and could be addressed by "a discrete response to improve the attractiveness of these placements" (2003, p. 41). The problem could be solved if districts and schools with low numbers of principal applicants were to "Adjust... incentives to make non-competitive districts and schools more attractive to potential candidates" (2003, p. 42).

The researchers also found a difference between superintendents and human resource administrators in what constituted a qualified principal applicant. This difference had a direct impact on the applicant pool for vacant principal's positions. Superintendents were primarily interested in the ability of principal applicants to lead professional colleagues than they were in more traditional indicators of quality such as teaching and administrative experience, and certification. The study reported a high level of agreement among superintendents that the ability to motivate staff and to hold them accountable for results were the most desirable characteristic for principal applicants. Nor did superintendents seem to insist that leadership experience be equated with educational experience. Conversely, district human resource administrators tended to interpret the demand for higher quality applicants as a call for more experience in education, including teaching and administrative experience, and to screen out applicants with a less traditional background. As a result "What superintendents end up with [as principals] rarely resembles what they set out to find" (Roza, et. al., 2003, p. 33). The best remedy for this situation would be for superintendents to pay closer attention to current principal recruitment and hiring practices in their own human resources department.

Of special relevance for this study is the finding that rural school districts are an exception to the general patterns reported in the research. Although the average number of applicants for principal positions in rural schools declined slightly, the number of applicants still exceeded the average number reported for less desirable districts and schools. Furthermore, rural superintendents exhibited little anxiety about their ability to find sufficient qualified principal applicants. Roza and her colleagues (2003) speculated that the reasons for this lack of concern might lie in the fact that rural districts traditionally attract fewer applicants than other districts and that, in rural communities, anticipating a principal vacancy was relatively easy. Superintendents could begin to groom a successor in advance of the actual vacancy, making them less dependent on outside applicants to fill vacant positions and therefore less concerned about the size of the applicant pool (Roza, et. al., 2003).

The question of whether or not a general shortage of quality candidates for principal position exists has no simple answer. Rather, the size of the applicant pool for any given principal vacancy depends on the interaction of several contextual factors. Among these are the general reputation of the school district or school; the economic and demographic characteristics of the community in which the district and school are situated; the grade level of the school

(high school, middle school, or elementary school); the priorities of the superintendent for principal performance; and the calculation by individual teachers of the relative balance between the incentives and disincentives of pursuing a principal's position. School districts are not powerless in the face of these difficulties. Positively addressing the administrative, organizational, financial, professional, and personal disincentives to becoming a principal can expand the applicant pool and pay future dividends in both the number and quality of those who are willing to meet the challenges of the principal's position.

The Nebraska Perspective

Nebraska has long been considered one of the states with a shortage of principal candidates. According to a report completed by Wendel in 1994, "A sizable portion of Nebraska's school administrators is speculated to reach retirement age within the next five to ten years, i.e., 1994 to 2004" (p. 11). Furthermore, in the 1993 Nebraska State Legislative session, Legislative Bill 292 was passed establishing the "Rule of 90" that impacted the retirement system. The law stated that "when (a) persons reach the age of 60 and (b) their age and number of years of experience within the retirement system equal 90, then (c) those persons may retire with full benefits" (Wendel, 1994, p. 11). In light of the passed legislation, the possibility of school administrative vacancies loomed even larger:

Of the 342 secondary principals, 3.5% could be eligible for retirement now with another 25.4% becoming eligible for retirement within the next ten years.... Within the elementary principalship, there were 796 reported positions. Of these positions, 5% of the individuals are past the age of 65. As many as an additional 42% of the elementary principals could be eligible for retirement within the next ten years.... There are 154 assistant secondary principals ...Of the individuals holding these positions, 26% could become eligible for retirement within the next ten years. ...There are 62 assistant elementary principals...of these, 11% could become eligible for retirement within the next ten years. (Wendel, 1994, pp. 47-49).

In a further study, Wendel (1999) surveyed 258 Nebraska school superintendents to measure their awareness of the estimates of retiring administrators. Two hundred twenty-six mostly rural superintendents indicated the following: the largest number of vacancies occurred for senior high school principal candidates, followed by the elementary school principals and assistant senior high school principals. Furthermore, Wendel reported that overall superintendents were receiving fewer applications for vacant principal's positions.

The Texas Perspective

In Texas, concerns about maintaining an adequate pool of qualified candidates for principal positions have translated into state-mandated changes in certification requirements and the creation of alternative routes to principal certification. The first substantial change in certification requirements occurred in 1999 when the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) eliminated lifetime certificates for all educators (State Board for Educator Certification). Teachers, principals, and superintendents certified after 1999 are issued five-year renewable certificates. For principals, the five-year certificate is renewable only after the administrator has completed an assessment center process, developed and implemented a professional growth plan, and accumulated 200 clock hours of professional development activities.

Furthermore, the temporary principal's certificate available to students who had met certain minimum requirements was discontinued as of June 1, 2005 (State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), 1999). Under the new rules, novice principals are issued a one-year probationary certificate that can be renewed twice. To be eligible for the probationary certificate, students must be employed as an administrator by a local school district and enrolled in a supervised internship. The standard five-year principal's certificate is issued only after the administrator has completed an approved preparation program, including an internship, served a probationary period, and passed the state-level licensure examination.

Texas has also created alternative paths to principal certification. College and university preparation programs continue to prepare the vast majority of aspiring principals, but school districts, regional education service centers, and private providers also prepare individuals seeking to become school leaders (State Board for Educator Certification). These are significant changes in principal certification requirements in the state and appear to be driven by general concerns over both the supply and quality of available candidates for school leadership positions.

Research Procedures

This is a qualitative inquiry into the dynamics of principal selection in rural school districts. Districts included in the study make up a convenience sample selected on the basis of two separate criteria: recent experience in hiring a principal and district enrollment. Data for the study were collected from a review of recent research literature and interviews with superintendents of rural school districts using a standard series of open-ended questions (Gay, 1996; Patton, 2002). Interviews with superintendents of participating school districts were conducted in person or via the telephone when distance prohibited face-to-face contact. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify common themes and experiences and to

bring forward the professional and personal characteristics superintendent desired in candidates selected to lead rural schools. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with participants to insure accuracy.

Forty-three superintendents, 23 in Nebraska and 20 in Texas, were interviewed for the study. Our goals were to learn if rural school districts in these states were experiencing a shortage of qualified principal candidates and to identify the professional and personal attributes rural superintendents sought in principal candidates. The selection of school districts for this qualitative study was based on two criteria: (1) the district had hired at least one principal within the previous three years; and (2) the district's total enrollment was no more than 1600 students. The directors of regional education service centers in both states were asked to identify districts within their boundaries who met these two basic criteria. Superintendents to be interviewed were selected from the lists submitted. In selecting superintendents we attempted to achieve as much in-state geographic balance as possible, i. e. we attempted to include at least one rural district from each of Texas' twenty Regional Educational Service Centers.

Some of the districts identified for inclusion in the study were within easy driving distance of the researcher's home university and in these districts face-to face interviews were conducted. Other districts were located in more distant areas and for these districts, telephone interviews were conducted. Student enrollment of the selected districts ranged from more than 1000 students to fewer than 100 students and included both K-12 and non-high school districts. One district straddles a state line, educating students from both Texas and Oklahoma through a long-standing interstate agreement. Only three of the superintendents interviewed for the study were women. The years of experience for participating superintendents ranged from 2 years to more than 20 years of service.

The 43 school districts in the study experienced 80 vacant principal positions in the preceding three years. These included the following: 21 elementary positions, 13 middle school positions, 38 high school positions and 8 K-12 positions. The most commonly cited reasons for vacant principal's positions were: principals leaving the district for a better position; retirement; contract non-renewal; and death. Other reasons for vacancies included: spousal dissatisfaction (no work for spouse, no outlet for personal growth), leaving the field of education altogether, and return to the classroom.

Candidates for rural principal positions were classified into three categories: (1) aspiring administrators, with zero years of administrative experience; (2) *beginning administrators*, with one to four years of administrative experience; and *senior administrators* with five or more years of administrative experience. The majority of applicants for principal positions in the districts studied were either aspiring or beginning administrators.

Was there a shortage of qualified principal candidates?

None of the superintendents in either state indicated a shortage of candidates for principal positions. The number of initial applicants in each district was large enough to allow superintendents to generate a pool of candidates that included more than one qualified applicant. In Texas, for example, the typical number of reported applicants for an advertised principal's position varied from 20-25 and the number of finalists invited for an interview was typically 3-5. No superintendent expressed anxiety or concern over having a sufficient number of qualified applicants to fill an available principal's position.

What professional qualifications do superintendents look for in principal applicants?

In Nebraska candidates were expected to hold an endorsement first as teacher and a second endorsement as principal for the grade level appropriate to the position he or she is seeking. For example, an elementary principal should be endorsed (certificated) for grades prek-6, and secondary principal for grades 7-12. The candidate is expected to have completed a master's degree program in educational administration. Applicants were expected to have taught at for least five years, and, if already holding a principal certificate, one to four years of experience as an assistant principal or principal was preferred.

Texas superintendents also wanted principal candidates to have completed a principal preparation program and to hold the appropriate certification. Experience was also a critical element. Superintendents preferred a candidate to have administrative experience at the school level for which they were applying, e.g. elementary school, middle school, or high school. Experience as an assistant principal or a principal was acceptable. Superintendents also wanted principals to have taught at an appropriate grade level and to have had leadership experience. Leadership experience might include service as a grade-level team leader, as a department chair, or leadership of a school-level team or committee. The level of leadership experience a candidate possessed was important to these superintendents and often made the difference in whether the candidate was considered qualified for the position or not.

Nebraska superintendents ranked knowledge of curriculum and assessment as well as "rich" teaching experiences as essential for principal candidates. They too preferred candidates who had leadership experiences outside of the classroom. Work on school improvement teams, or leading a standards or curriculum committee, or having a "principal-like experience" was important. With the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and state accountability requirements impacting the work of principals, an applicant's knowledge of teaching and learning was of paramount importance. Superintendents were seeking principals who had the following attributes:

- An academic focus, with high expectations for self, teachers, and students
- Experience evaluating teachers
- A proven motivator of others
- Skill and knowledge in helping teachers improve classroom performance
- Knowledge of both state and federal standards
- Knowledgeable and experienced in the school improvement process
- A clear vision of teaching and learning that can be clearly communicated to teachers and community

Texas superintendents favored principal candidates who were experienced with the state's high-stakes accountability system. Principals were expected to know how to work with teachers to raise achievement test scores. They were also expected to be able to work effectively with an ethnically and socio-cultural, and economically diverse student population. District and school accountability ratings are critical political issues for superintendents and a candidate's ability to improve or maintain a school's accountability rating is crucial (McGhee & Nelson, 2005). For Texas superintendents the federal No Child Left Behind Act complicated but did not supplant the requirements of the state accountability system.

What personal qualities do superintendents seek in candidates?

Superintendents appreciated candidates who interviewed well. Applicants who presented themselves as capable of operating the school without close supervision by the superintendent were attractive candidates. The ability to work cooperatively with teachers and parents is a valued attribute as is the applicant's potential to work as a part of an administrative team. In describing their preferred relationship to the principal, most (but not all) superintendents expressed a preference for the roles of colleague and mentor.

From the actual principal interview process, superintendents tried to learn about individual personal goals and how those might be reflected in the school. Self-assurance and high expectations for self and others were highly regarded qualities. Applicants who were organized and possessed skills that complemented those of the superintendent's were regarded as strong candidates. A record of success, positive references, and enthusiasm were essential. Honesty, integrity, and moral values were high on the lists of desirable personal attributes for a principal.

What were superintendent's expectations for principal leadership?

Superintendents in both states expected principals to be the instructional leaders of their schools. The superintendents' conceptions of what constituted instructional leadership included specific principal behavior. Instructional leaders evaluated teachers, motivated staff, and understood professional development. If teachers had weaknesses, instructional leaders should know how to assist them to improve their performance. Instructional leaders should also be able to identify goals and articulate them to the staff and community. As an innovator and change agent, instructional leaders were described as problem solvers, critical thinkers, and motivators.

Quality applicants were expected to demonstrate an understanding of the human relations component of the principal's role, including communication skills and competency in writing and speaking. Applicants were also expected to evidence "people skills" in working with parents and students and to be approachable and willing to listen to all constituents. Superintendents expected principals to be visible both in the school and in the community. Candidates who could work with diverse groups, pulling them together for change were highly sought after. Other qualities sought included:

- Success in building and maintaining good relations with the board and the superintendent
- Ability to relate well with staff, students, and parents and to be accepted by the community
- Ability to exercise sound judgment

What other qualities are important for rural principals?

Superintendents believed that there are definite qualities or characteristics that are important for principals in rural districts. In short, principals of rural schools had to be flexible and versatile. Principals were expected to perform routine administrative tasks competently but also to lend a hand in supervising the playground, manage the Title I program, drive the school bus, work well with special education students and parents, and direct co-curricular activities if needed. As one Texas superintendent put it, rural principals "will have to do things that aren't in the principal's job description...cut the lawns, plant flowers, help with the district banquet, help out with graduation...all in the same day!" Interruptions happen throughout the day and candidates need to know how to juggle many different tasks at the same time. The ability to shift roles and perform a variety of tasks is a survival skill for rural principals.

Summary

Understanding of the political culture of the rural school and community is important. Everything that occurs in a rural school is accessible to the community and news travels quickly. The coffee drinkers at the local café may have learned of school problems even before students are dismissed for the day. The clerk in the local grocery store may have an opinion about school issues and be eager to share them with the principal while ringing up the bill. Living up to community expectations, being family-oriented, and knowing what the community will and will not tolerate are important political skills for rural principals. In a small community the principal is never off duty.

The majority of superintendents in both states stressed the importance of the principal's commitment to the community. This translates into the expectation that the principal and his or her family reside in the community, contribute to its life as a member of a local service group, maintain a local church membership, and take part in community celebrations. As one Texas superintendent described it, people in his small community "work hard and are active in the community activities. They expect the principal to do the same thing." And for the principal who is perceived as a hard worker and shows that he or she values the community and wants to a part of it "there was nothing they [the community] wouldn't do."

Not only is the ability of the applicant to fit into the community perceived as important, so too is that of the spouse. A husband or wife needs a place in the community whether it is a school connection (a position as teacher or paraprofessional) or a non-school position in the community or in a near-by town. Several superintendents indicated that finding work for a spouse was often the deciding point in securing a new principal. It can also determine how effective the principal will be and how long he or she will remain on the job in that rural district. If a principal's spouse and family do not find satisfaction living in a small community there will soon be a vacancy for the principal's position.

Being a rural school principal is not for everyone. Many superintendents believe that it takes a special individual, one who truly values a small town and can tolerate a high degree of visibility, who demonstrates that he or she wants to be close to the community and to students, and who understands the educational challenges a small district faces. Rural principals need to recognize that change comes slowly in rural areas and that additional help in the form of an assistant principal often is not available. "Small schools do not have levels of bureaucracy so the principal needs a diversity of background experiences," said one administrator. Resiliency, "the ability to roll with the punches," is required.

Superintendents of rural school districts in Nebraska and Texas report no shortage of qualified candidates for principal positions, nor did the superintendents interviewed exhibit undue concern about being able to draw from an adequate pool of candidates. This is consistent with the current research literature on the supply of and demand for principal applicants (Roza, et. al., 2003). We also found that applicants for rural principal's positions tended to be aspiring and beginning administrators looking for their first position as a principal. Superintendents reported that they looked for specific professional and personal qualities in principal applicants. These included qualities reported elsewhere in the literature such as leadership potential and the ability to motivate teachers and hold them accountable for improved student achievement (Roza et. al., 2003; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Howley et. al., 2005). However, rural superintendents value other qualities in principal applicants. These qualities included self-confidence, the ability to act independently of the superintendent's direct supervision, the capacity to act as a team member, strong verbal and written communication skills, and the ability to perform a number of tasks competently and simultaneously. Rural superintendents place a high value on leadership experience when selecting principals. Desired experience goes beyond time spent as an assistant principal or principal to include experience as a teacher at an appropriate grade or school level and as a teacher leader, i.e. team or grade level leader, department chair, or members of a school-wide committee. Texas superintendents were especially concerned that principal candidates demonstrate some experience with the state accountability system as well as the requirements of NCLB.

Rural superintendents placed great value on the ability of potential principals to fit into the political and social context of the local community. The concept of "fitting in" has several dimensions. First and foremost, it means that the principal and his or her family are active in the life of the community. This means more than just being accessibility to students and parents during the school day and belonging to a community church, or local service club. Rather the principal's ability to "fit in" shows itself in the principal's work ethic and how she or he demonstrates genuine respect for the community's cultural, social, and political values. "Fitting in" can have both positive and negative aspects and superintendents went to some lengths to make sure that candidates, especially those who did not come from rural backgrounds, understood the power of community expectations. The ability to "fit in" is an important quality for rural principals and superintendents value candidates who possess it.

The research tells us that an individual's decision to seek a principal's position is influenced by the potential applicant's perception of a number of contextual factors. The principal's job is a difficult one and from the outside rural school districts may appear to be havens of well-disciplined students, supportive parents, and lower job stress. Those who have lived and worked in rural schools know that the reality is much more complex. Rural principals are often paid less than colleagues in larger schools, work without the support of assistant principals and specialized central office staff, and are frequently isolated from professional colleagues. Rural communities can also suffer from poverty, underemployment, and most of the same social problems that are found in urban centers (Duncan, 1999; Hardy, 2005). Nonetheless, the favorable perception of life in a rural community appeals to many potential principal applicants. Superintendents use the popular image of life in a rural community in attracting principal candidates by emphasizing quality of life issues (i.e. the good reputation of the school district, well-behaved, well-disciplined students, an academic emphasis, high accountability ratings, a slower, less stressful pace of life, and a supportive community) to attract quality principals.

Conclusions

This study suggests that superintendents of rural school districts in at least two states with a high percentage of rural school districts are not facing a shortage of applicants for vacant principal's positions. Nor did superintendents interviewed express undue anxiety about their ability to find qualified applicants when required. Like their counterparts in larger urban and suburban school districts, rural superintendents expect principal applicants to have completed an appropriate principal preparation program and to hold the proper certificates. They value leadership skills over a traditional management ability and expect their principals to be instructional leaders. But rural superintendents also expect principal applicants to possess specific attributes. These include the ability to perform several tasks at the same time and to function without support from assistant principals and specialized central office personnel. Rural principals must also understand and be willing to work within the unique social, cultural, and political life of the rural community. The popular stereotype of the pastoral rural community attracts many applicants to positions in rural schools and superintendents are not averse to using the image to offset some of the disadvantages of working in rural school districts. For the right candidate, a rural principal's position offers an opportunity to contribute in visible ways to the life of a rural community and can be a rewarding professional and personal experience.

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