Chapter 19
Developing Instructional Leadership and Communication Skills through Online Professional Development:
Focusing on Rural and Urban Principals

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ABSTRACT

Principals and school leaders play a pivotal role in teacher satisfaction, retention, and learning; thus, they are uniquely positioned to help teachers improve their practice. Principals face many of the same challenges that teachers do, especially in schools serving low-income, low-performing, and ethnically diverse students. This chapter examines the extant literature concerning online professional development (OPD) and how it may hold particular promise for principals and other school leaders who work in these challenging settings, with a focus on attending to principal instructional leadership. A corollary purpose centers on how effective online communication (and the use of digital modalities) can create greater access and flexibility for participants. Establishing lines of communication and building online community may help overcome the professional isolation experienced by principals. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Schools in the Unites States are tasked with educating an increasingly diverse population of students in a rapidly changing world. Schools are dynamic communities and environments where the roles of their leaders are complex and challenging. Supporting and equipping these leaders to succeed may be one of the most important factors impacting student learning and improving student outcomes. Furthermore, the capacity of principals serving schools comprised of large numbers of ethnically diverse is doubly important due to high teacher turnover and additional difficulties present in predominantly urban and rural school settings. Upon completion of their credentialing programs, principals often have much to learn, and in the age of high stakes testing and accountability, they

may have little time to learn what they will need to survive and then thrive at their school sites. This chapter will explore online professional development (OPD) focused on developing principal instructional leadership and communication skills in urban and rural settings. Additionally, how OPD may provide a new avenue to support principals' development and build their leadership capacity will be examined.

BACKGROUND

The Roles of Principals

It can be argued that a principal, more than any other individual, can move a school forward and impact student learning. Indeed, high performing school leaders have long been associated with high performing schools (Barth, 1986; Marks & Printy, 2003), and although teachers play a critical role in and have significant impact on student learning (Hawley & Valli, 2000), principals have a significant and direct impact on teacher learning and performance (Hallinger, 2005; Youngs & King, 2002). Broadly, principals have significant influence on teacher retention, teacher learning and teaching, and subsequently, student learning (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). For example, lack of administrative support is responsible for 40% of teacher turnover, more than double the rate of turnover due to teacher concerns about student behavioral issues (Boyd et al., 2011).

Urban School Leadership

Principals in urban settings face a number of challenges that do not exist (or that exist to a lesser extent) in suburban schools (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2013). These challenges include staffing schools with effective teachers, engaging parents and the community, and coping with greater levels of stress (Markow et al., 2013). Teacher turnover in urban schools serving large percentages of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds is particularly problematic (Grissom, 2011); however, in urban settings principals can have a greater impact on teacher satisfaction and retention. The financial cost, time, and effort of having to hire, train, and support teachers only to see them leave can be daunting. Grissom found that high-performing principals had the same teacher turnover rates at urban and suburban schools. Average-performing principals however; had higher turnover rates in urban schools when compared with suburban schools. Thus, focusing on supporting urban school principals and increasing their effectiveness can have a significant impact on teacher satisfaction, retention, and performance. As high rates of teacher turnover are associated with poor student performance (Grissom, 2011), reducing these rates in urban settings is especially critical for the growing population of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Additionally, as principals can often be unprepared for leading schools when they complete their initial accreditation process (Barnett, 2004) and their schools may be under-resourced (Grissom, 2011), they, themselves, may be at a higher risk of burnout and susceptible to turnover. Indeed, Grissom calls for a policy change to promote finding and hiring the best principals into these schools. Nevertheless, even the best principals are unlikely to excel in challenging urban schools without subsequent. Thus, supporting principals' capacity to directly impact teacher performance and satisfaction may be the top priority for principal development.

Rural School Leadership

Principals in rural settings face many of the same challenges that urban principals do. These shared challenges include school infrastructure and finances, as well as attracting and keeping qualified teachers (Theobald, 2005). Like their urban counterparts, many new principals in

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