

## Involuntary departure of Texas public school principals

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined factors associated with involuntary departure of Texas school principals to determine the ineffective behaviors that erode principal leadership. Data for the study were collected by using a validated survey instrument of 22 factors that contribute to the involuntary departure of public school principals. The questionnaire was used with a stratified sample of 440 public school superintendents. Analysis of the data revealed that 55% of the responses as to the reasons for involuntary departure fell within the personal-human relations category and 45% fell within the performance of duties category. No significant relationship existed between the district size and personal-human relationship reasons why principals lose their jobs. In contrast, a significant relationship existed between district size and involuntary departure due to performance of duties. A high number of staff complaints about administrators was the most frequent organizational outcome of a failing principal.

Keywords: educational leadership, principalship, involuntary separation, administration

## INTRODUCTION

The role of the school principal has undergone dramatic changes (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). The role is dichotomous and has evolved from a task-oriented perspective to one that incorporates a personal-human relations perspective. Principals must concern themselves not only with tasks, but must work with purpose in developing relationships among internal and external forces. Putting forth determined effort to appease and reconcile diverse groups with varied objectives, beliefs and values, and philosophies, requires leaders to demonstrate leadership skills that can produce a creative, trusting, stimulating, and learning climate for all stakeholders. Principals are expected to transform cultures, yet are “burdened by too many role responsibilities that inhibit developing and practicing the new competencies—additions without anything being taken away” (Fullan, 2007, p. 168). Indeed, leaders are expected to generate significant improvement and increase student achievement while simultaneously meeting the daily and long-term learning and social needs of the students (Durden, 2008).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) Act illustrates a federal mandate that generates high anxiety for school districts and dispenses punitive consequences if schools fail to meet federal standards. “The Act actually amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965” (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2005, p. 76) and sets ambitious goals for schools to raise student achievement by holding states accountable so as to receive federal funds. It attempts to improve educational quality by including “equity, excellence, and choice goals” (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin 2005, p. 191). Schools that fail to reach adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward stipulated goals are at risk of receiving severe sanctions. Definitely, if schools continue to not meet AYP, fundamental reforms must be made. These reforms include options such as “replacing all or most of the school staff, which may include the principal” (Walsh et al., 2005, p. 78). With the advent of the NCLB Act, principals now have the added pressure of meeting AYP or risk losing their jobs.

As principals converge from the task dimension into the human dimension, it becomes essential to prepare future leaders not only in the managerial aspects of leadership, but necessitates training on interpersonal skills and abilities. “Task-oriented behaviors such as short-term planning, clarifying work roles and task objectives, and monitoring operations and employee performance” (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005, p. 23) are vital to the management of schools; however, leaving out the human aspect of getting the job done is erroneous. Arguably, being able to adapt to the external and internal environments, inspiring and empowering staff, and providing the means to increase professional capacity are all critical to the success of the leader.

According to Yukl (1998), “leadership literature currently includes over 5000 studies, and the number continues to increase by hundreds each year” (p. 494), yet ambiguity and little knowledge about leadership continues. After more than 3,000 leadership studies, Stogdill (1974) found that the “endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership” (p. vii). There has been much study on leadership in the 20th century; however, most of the focus has been on leadership effectiveness. The concentrated focus has been on which traits and behaviors a leader must exhibit to ensure success.

Davis (1998) observed that there was a vast amount of literature on which behaviors a leader must exhibit to experience effective leadership, yet underscored how “few studies have examined factors relating to ineffective school leadership” (p. 58). He further contended, “Research on leadership effectiveness has evolved throughout the 20th century from identifying the universal traits of great leaders to examining the complex interrelationships between leader

traits, behaviors, and environmental influences” (Davis, 1998, p. 61); however, there is still much to discover as to what extent these behaviors determine ineffectiveness or effectiveness. Factors that determine whether a leader is effective or ineffective continue to be ambiguous. Certainly, there may not exist a universal model of effective leadership, yet this study attempted to shed light on those leadership behaviors that can disrupt the career of the public school principal and may indirectly point out to principals which ineffective behaviors to avoid to enhance job security.

A study by Davis (1998) revealed factors that led to the involuntary departure of public school principals in the state of California. The study, which sought to discover the main reasons for involuntary departure was conducted before the federal passage of the authoritative No Child Left Behind Act (2001). This legislation came into the education province with sweeping reforms and mandates to close the achievement gap between high-performing and low-performing students. Accountability became part of the educational jargon. Indeed, currently, schools who continuously fail to demonstrate adequately yearly progress can move into “corrective action,” which can result in principals being displaced. The Davis study revealed that performance of duties had less influence on the dismissal, demotion, or resignation of the principal than the fostering of personal-human relationships. This study replicated the study conducted by Davis (1998).

The purpose of the study was to determine the main reasons certain principals experienced leadership failure. The study aimed to reveal the ineffective behaviors that erode the public school principal’s leadership, ultimately leading to involuntary separation from the principalship. The study also sought to determine if a relationship existed between the size of the district and job loss and if organizational outcomes were related to a principal’s ineffective leadership behavior.

## **METHOD**

The research methodology employed in the study was quantitative in nature and investigated a natural phenomenon as opposed to studying the impacts of the phenomenon. The Yukl Multiple Linkage Model of leadership effectiveness was the conceptual framework upon which this study was conducted. The design included a descriptive analysis that investigated the main reasons public school principals experience involuntary departure from their jobs as perceived by superintendents. The study employed chi-square tests to investigate the relationship between the size of the district and reasons for involuntary departure and to examine the relationship between the reasons for principal departures and organizational outcomes. This study was a nonexperimental design due to independent variables not being manipulated. This study was not designed to prove cause-effect relationships between independent and dependent variables, rather the focus of this research was to explain what might have caused the involuntary departure of public school principals in the state of Texas.

## **Population and Sample**

Participants of the study were superintendents who have supervised principals who involuntarily departed from their positions. The population consisted of public school superintendents in the state of Texas. Superintendents were selected as the population of study due to the nature of their jobs. In nearly all districts, superintendents review cases that involve

involuntary departure. A stratified random sample was used to select participants. To obtain a 95% confidence level with a 5% confidence interval, a minimum sample size of 440 superintendents was used for the study (The Research Advisor, 2006). The margin of error was 3.5%. A response rate of 39% was achieved through the return of 173 questionnaires. Of the 173 questionnaires returned, 42 were incomplete.

The Texas Education Agency lists 1036 public school superintendents in the state of Texas that serve in districts that range from student membership of over 50,000 to districts less than 500 students. To ensure the sample represented superintendents from small, medium, and large school districts, districts were divided into nine groups as defined by the Texas Education Agency’s Snapshot 2009 Summary Tables: District Size: (a) Group 1—Under 500 (b) Group 2—500 to 999; (c) Group 3—1000 to 1,599; (d) Group 4—1,600 to 2,999; (e) Group 5—3,000 to 4,999; (f) Group 6—5,000 to 9,999; (g) Group 7—10,000 to 24,999; (h) Group 8—25,000 to 49,999; and (i) Group 9—50,000 and over. Participants were then randomly selected from each group. The following table displays the individual groups, the number of superintendents that participated, and the percentage of return by district size.

Table 1  
Superintendent Participation by District Size

| Enrollment       | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-----------|---------|
| Under 500        | 34        | 26.0%   |
| 500 to 999       | 24        | 18.3%   |
| 1,000 to 1,599   | 19        | 14.5%   |
| 1,600 to 2,999   | 18        | 13.7%   |
| 3,000 to 4,999   | 12        | 9.2%    |
| 5,000 to 9,999   | 7         | 5.3%    |
| 10,000 to 24,999 | 8         | 6.1%    |
| 25,000 to 49,999 | 7         | 5.3%    |
| 50,000 and over  | 2         | 1.5%    |

*N* = 131

Superintendents in school districts of fewer than 500 had the highest response rate with 26%; school districts with over 50,000 student membership had the lowest response rate at 1.5%.

**Instrumentation**

A quantitative behavior description questionnaire was utilized to collect data regarding superintendent perspectives of principal personal-human relations and performance of duties. The researcher received permission to use the instrument developed by Davis (1998) in his study of California principals. From the superintendents’ perspectives, the questionnaire was used to identify the main reasons for the involuntary departure of school principals and to determine if the size of the district related to principals losing their jobs.

The basic principles of Yukl’s Multiple Linkage Model (1998) of effective leadership were fundamental to the questionnaire designed by Davis (1998). The model describes “the interacting effects of managerial behavior and situational variables on the intervening variables that determine the performance of a work unit” (Yukl, 2008, p. 240). Yukl (2008) identifies

intervening variables as task commitment; ability and role clarity; organization of the work; cooperation and mutual trust; resource and support; and external coordination.

Participants responded to a series of items on the survey. First, Texas superintendents were asked to select the top five reasons principals may involuntarily depart from their jobs from the 22 reasons list. Second, they were asked to list any other factors that may result in a principal's involuntary departure. Next, they were asked if they have ever supervised a principal who was demoted, dismissed, or counseled out of the position. If so, they were asked to answer which organizational outcomes were associated with the principal's failure. Respondents were given the opportunity to add other factors not listed as to why principals depart their jobs and were invited to provide comments pertaining to the questionnaire items. The questionnaire concluded with demographic questions.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from the respondents were analyzed to gain an overall understanding of the responses to the questionnaire as well as to obtain an insight into the superintendents' perspectives on the involuntary departure of public school principals in the state of Texas. A frequency of distribution for responses ranking the top five reasons for involuntary departure was provided in a table. Chi-square tests were used to determine if any statistical significance existed between the top reasons for involuntary departure and the superintendents' school district size. The researcher utilized another chi-square test to determine if the top organizational outcomes were significantly related to the top reasons for involuntary departure. Demographic data were analyzed as they related to each factor. An alpha level of .05% was used to establish significance for all statistical analysis and tests.

Research Question #1: What is the demographic profile of superintendents' districts in the state of Texas? The question was addressed with descriptive statistics. Superintendents were asked to respond to the district enrollment size and what region of Texas they represented. The results were presented and analyzed through descriptive data.

Research Question #2: According to the experiences and perspectives of superintendents, what are the main reasons principals lose their jobs? The question was specifically addressed by the responses received from the stratified random sample of superintendents in the state of Texas who supervised at least one principal who experienced job loss. The written questionnaire questions were presented to superintendents in a design that recorded the reasons why principals, whom they supervise, lost their jobs. The frequency of responses categorized as personal-human relations were compared with responses classified as performance of duties (Davis, 1998). The results were presented and analyzed using a descriptive data table.

Research Question #3: Is there a relationship between the size of the district and the reasons why principals lose their jobs? The question was addressed by dividing the stratified groups of participants into three groups for the purpose of determining whether the top reasons principals involuntarily depart their jobs varies among superintendents that serve in small, medium, or large school districts. Results were presented and analyzed using a descriptive data table. A chi square test was used to determine any variance where an alpha level of .05% was used to establish significance.

Research Question #4: Are organizational outcomes related to a principal's ineffective leadership behavior? The question was addressed by examining the questionnaire responses and analyzing this relationship. A frequency distribution of responses was provided in a table and a

chi-square test was used to determine if a relationship existed between organizational outcomes and reasons for involuntary departure.

**RESULTS**

In good faith, the research study sought to capture the five most prevalent reasons given for involuntary departure of a principal and any related organizational symptom that may have been associated with the triggering reason(s). The identical survey used by Davis (1998) was used in this study. However, when the empirical results were collected from the valid sample of 131 respondents, the data did not support the initial structure. There were not “five top organizational symptoms.” There was a clear demarcation between the top three symptoms, each picked over 250 times, collectively accounting for 66% of all picks, a middle tier of two symptoms in the low 100s accounting for 15%, and the bottom 4 symptoms, with less than 100 picks accounting for the final 16%.

Using the typical chi square rule of at least 5 elements per cell, none of the 22 reasons had at least 5 picks in each of the 9 symptoms. When the three top symptoms were analyzed, 13 reasons (7 Human Relations and 6 Performance of Duties) had at least 5 picks in each symptom. It was decided to run two chi square analyses – one for the 3 Organizational Symptoms by the 7 Human Relations reasons and one 3 Organizational Symptoms by the 6 Performance of Duties reasons.

**Superintendent Ranking of Principal Job Loss**

The top five reasons why principals lose their jobs were first determined by superintendents ranking the 5 most frequent reasons from the list of 22 reasons provided in the survey. The reasons with the five largest responses were then identified. An analysis of the data revealed that 55% of the responses fell within the personal-human relations category and 45% fell within the performance of duties category. These data suggest that factors relating to personal-human relations have a greater influence on the success of the principal than factors dealing with administrative proficiency. Table 2 displays the top five reasons why principals lose their jobs.

Table 2  
The Top Five Reasons Why Principals Involuntarily Depart Their Jobs

| Rank | Number | Percentage | Abbreviated Reason  | Survey Number |
|------|--------|------------|---|---------------|
| 1    | 79     | 12.3%      | Fail to communicate or build positive relationships                         | 1             |
| 2    | 59     | 9.2%       | Fail to make good decisions and judgments                                   | 15            |
| 3    | 47     | 7.3%       | Unable to build a strong base of support                                    | 4             |
| 4    | 44     | 6.9%       | Repeat mistakes and ineffective administrative practices                    | 22            |
| 5    | 43     | 6.7%       | Unable to motivate teachers, parents, and students that promote camaraderie | 7             |

N = 131

**Relationship between District Size and Principal Job Loss**

Data analysis showed no relationship between the district size and job loss due to personal-human relationship factors, Pearson  $\chi^2 (6, N = 131) = 5.64, p = .465$ . In contrast, the data reflect a significant relationship between district size and involuntary departure due to performance of duties, Pearson  $\chi^2 (10, N = 131) = 27.48, p = .002$ .

Table 3  
Reasons Why Principals Involuntarily Depart Their Jobs: Comparisons by Performance of Duties and District Size

| Reasons   | District Size (3 levels) |               |       | Total |
|---|--------------------------|---------------|-------|-------|
|   | 10,000 or more           | 1,600 – 9,999 | <1600 |       |
| Fail to make good decisions   | 36                       | 62            | 50    | 148   |
| Fail to promote collaborative decision making                           | 11                       | 15            | 22    | 48    |
| Fail to meet expectations for student academic achievement              | 25                       | 22            | 29    | 76    |
| Fail to provide a clear vision and direction                            | 27                       | 21            | 29    | 77    |
| Fail to effectively organize administrative tasks, activities, and time | 14                       | 10            | 32    | 56    |
| Repeat mistakes and ineffective administrative practices                | 40                       | 26            | 26    | 92    |
| Total   | 153                      | 156           | 188   | 497   |

**Relationship between Organizational Outcomes and Principal Ineffective Leadership Behavior**

The data reflect that a high number of staff complaints about administrators were the most frequent organizational outcome of a failing principal. Lower than expected student academic performance followed closely by a high number of parent complaints about administrators and/or teachers were the next frequent outcomes. The least ranked organizational outcomes of a failing principal were a high number of parent complaints about the quality of the curriculum and poorly maintained facilities, given available fiscal and human resources.

The top three organizational outcomes were identified and the responses were cross-tabulated with the responses to the top seven personal-human relations. A chi square test determined that organizational outcomes were not significantly related to the personal-human relations reasons for involuntary departure, Pearson  $\chi^2 (12, N = 131) = 2.22, p = .999$ .

A cross-tabulation was performed between the top three organizational symptoms and the responses of the top six performance of duties reasons. A chi square test determined that organizational outcomes were not significantly related to the performance of duties reasons for involuntary departure, Pearson  $\chi^2 (10, N = 131) = 3.31, p = .973$ .

Of the 131 respondents, 32 provided additional written comments that were categorized into themes. The majority of the responses were variations of the 22 reasons listed in the questionnaire ( $n = 21$ ). The second most frequent theme was low staff morale ( $n = 5$ ), followed by lack of support from board members ( $n = 3$ ) and not qualified for the position ( $n = 3$ ).

## CONCLUSIONS

Involuntary departures adversely affect principals, schools, and communities. Of 131 respondents, 75.6% supervised a principal who was demoted, dismissed, or counseled out of his or her position. According to superintendents, the five most common reasons principals lose their jobs are poor communication, failure in decision making, lack of support base, repeated mistakes, and inability to promote camaraderie.

This study produced similar results to Davis' (1998) findings, which revealed that performance of duties had less influence on the dismissal, demotion, or resignation of the principal than the fostering of personal-human relationships. The results of the study support the vast amount of literature that emphasizes the importance of cultivating relationships and building support bases among teachers, students, and communities (Yukl, 2008; Fullan, 2001), yet contradicts the theory that leaders must be highly skilled in maintaining both tasks and relationships to be effective in the principalship.

No relationship existed between district size and the personal-human relations reasons why principals lose their jobs. In general, superintendents from the varied district sizes noted that the primary reason for a principal's involuntary departure was a failure to communicate in ways that build positive relationships with parents, teachers, students, and/or colleagues. However, the data reflected a significant relationship existed between the size of the district and the reasons for involuntary departure due to performance of duties. Principals in medium and small size districts were more likely to experience involuntary departure due to the failure to make good decisions and judgments. Principals from large districts appeared to experience involuntary departure more often due to repeated mistakes and ineffective administrative practices.

A high number of staff complaints about administrators were the most frequent organizational outcome of a failing principal (25%). Lower than expected student academic performance (21%) and a high number of parent complaints about administrators and/or teachers (20%) followed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this study are meant to provide a view into the reasons for involuntary departure of public school principals in the state of Texas. The results of the study are intended to provide insight to both novice and seasoned public school principals as to the ineffective behaviors that can lead to principalship derailment. Future studies in this area might focus on the relationship between district size and organizational outcomes, funding correlated with involuntary departure, or differences in perceptions of principals who have experienced involuntary departure and the superintendents who supervised them.

It is recommended that principals continuously self-reflect and examine their leadership behaviors to improve their interpersonal skills as well as their performance of duties practices. Professional leadership development courses should incorporate an interpersonal skills training component that involves action research on ineffective and effective behaviors, which ultimately

can assist future and current principals on their way to becoming effective leaders.

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