

From Isolation to Collaboration: School Principals

Allison Drago

Vincent Pecchia

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Education

In Educational Leadership

University of Washington Tacoma

2016

Supervisory Committee:

Richard Knuth, Ph.D., Chair

Kathleen Beaudoin, Ph.D., Member

Forrest Griek, Ed.D., Member

FROM ISOLATION TO COLLABORATION: SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Abstract

This study addressed the overarching question, What are the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of school principals in Washington State related to professional isolation? Principals are reportedly leaving the profession due to high work demands, lack of support, and feelings of isolation experienced in their work. By analyzing data obtained from a survey of school principals in Washington State, this study investigated perceived factors that contribute to professional isolation and the perceived impact of professional isolation on factors such as work performance. Also explored are systems of collaboration that have the potential to lessen the impacts of professional isolation. The survey data, and conclusions based on the data, inform recommendations for the design and implementation of two collaborative systems: principal mentoring programs and principal professional learning communities.

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Acknowledgements

It has been a privilege to serve as school principals, and now support them in our central office leadership roles. The voices of the principals we serve are the inspiration for this study. We appreciate all we have learned from our principal colleagues.

We are grateful to our friends and family members who supported us through the completion of our doctoral program. It has been our good fortune to work under the direction of our capstone chair, Dr. Rich Knuth, who has provided guidance, encouragement, and feedback. Dr. Kathy Beaudoin and Dr. Forrest Griek, members of our committee, have also provided support throughout the research process. Dr. Rich Knuth has committed his career to the development and preparation of school principals in the Puget Sound region of Washington State. For his contributions to school leadership, we dedicate our capstone to him.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of school principal leadership is a top priority of school reform initiatives. Principal leadership is cited as one of the most pressing issues needing to be addressed in order to positively influence student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2012). In fact, principal leadership is second only to teacher quality in order of most important factors impacting growth in student achievement (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). Additionally, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2005) found that the quality of principal leadership is positively correlated with student achievement and that school principals “can have a profound impact on the achievement of students in their schools” (p. 38). Researchers agree that “the principal remains the central source of leadership” in schools (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 4); yet, too often, school principals are left to lead schools in isolation and to seek guidance or mentorship on their own.

The role of the school principal is frequently referred to as the “loneliest position in K-12 education” (Maxwell, 2015, p. 2). Most principals enter the profession with experience as classroom teachers, a role for which there is typically significant support and collegial collaboration. The contrast between the roles of teacher and principal is stark. The principal is no longer one of many teachers in the school; rather he or she is alone without job-alike peers. Acceptance of the supervisory and evaluative responsibilities of the administrative role delineates a clear separation between teachers and principal. As a result, novice principals often experience such feelings as surprise, a sense of ultimate responsibility, stress, and loneliness (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

But principals are not the only educators to feel isolated. For example, a significant amount of literature exists concerning teacher isolation. To reduce isolation and autonomy

among teachers, schools have introduced systems of collaboration, such as professional learning communities (PLCs) (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Numerous authors have asserted a positive relation between teacher collaboration and student achievement (e.g., Fullan, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Both educational literature and current practice indicate better outcomes for student achievement when structures that foster collaboration are in place for teachers (Bauer & Brazer, 2013, Dufour et al., 2010; Hord, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2006). These collaborative structures are not as readily available for principals, and studies have identified elementary school principals as especially isolated from job-alike peers (Simieou, Decman, Grigsby, & Schumacher, 2010). Although research does identify the lack of structured support for principals when compared to that provided to address teacher isolation, much less literature explores the impact of principal professional isolation on work performance or advances solutions to remedy the phenomenon (Simieou et al., 2010).

Beyond the lack of collaborative structures, principal isolation exists in an environment of daily pressure to perform the complex, demanding, and stressful work of improving the achievement of all students (Fullan, 2002; Fullan, 2010; Hertling, 2001; Malone & Caddell, 2000). “Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to improvement in student achievement” (Fullan, 2002, p.16). Without the support and guidance of supervisors and colleagues, the principalship can be extremely demanding. Support structures, such as professional learning communities, mentoring, and central office support, have the potential to assist principals’ work in this demanding, dynamic, and stressful profession. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and understand the impacts of school principal professional isolation and explore ways to minimize this phenomenon.

Operational Definitions

- *School principal or principal* is the term for leaders or administrators of schools in the preschool through grade 12 educational system.
- *Elementary school principal* is the term for leaders or administrators of schools that serve students grades P-6. While districts may configure student grade bands differently, these principals work in schools with students in primary and intermediate grades. An elementary school typically has one principal who serves as the leader, manager, and evaluator of all teachers and support staff. Historically, most elementary schools do not employ an assistant principal unless enrollment exceeds 600 students (Hertling, 2001).
- *Secondary school principal* is the term for leaders or administrators of schools that serve students in grades 6-12. Common grade level bands at the secondary level include 6-8 and 9-12.
- *Novice school principals* are leaders or administrators with three or fewer years of experience as principals.
- *Veteran school principals* are leaders or administrators with four or more years of experience as a principal.
- *Professional isolation* is a state of being that is fostered by personal and/or professional barriers that prevent one from collaborating with job-alike peers.
- *Collaboration* occurs when two or more professionals work together to share, problem-solve, and support each other in accomplishing shared goals. Effective collaboration includes a collective sense of purpose, shared thinking and brainstorming of ideas, and active participation.

- *Work performance* includes a principal's perception of his or her job satisfaction, and how well he or she is executing the duties and meeting the expectations of the principalship.

CHAPTER 2: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Fullan (2010) asserted that “the principal is second only to the teacher in his or her impact on the student” (p. 14), but recruiting and retaining exceptional educators to serve as principals is becoming more difficult for school districts (Malone & Caddell, 2000). The average tenure of an elementary school principal is 4.9 years, a middle school principal is 4.48 years, and a high school principal is only 3.3 years (Viadero, 2009). A University of Washington report noted that nationally approximately two out of 10 school principals leave their positions each year (Campbell, DeArmond, & Denice, 2014). In 2013, the turnover rate of school principals in Washington State was 15%, which was slightly lower than the national average. According to a National Association of Elementary Principals study, principals left the profession because of workload, personal costs (demands on time, family, and personal health), restrictive policies and procedures, and “profound isolation on the job” (School Leadership Network [SLN], 2014, p. 12). As one Illinois school superintendent stated, “I’m really worried about the crisis. If we continue to burn out these people, we are not going to find leaders” (Lovely, 2004, p. 1). According to Copeland (2001), “We have reached the point where aggregate expectations for the principalship are so exorbitant, they exceed the limits of what reasonably might be expected from one person” (p. 529). A principal is expected to be “a manager, instructional leader, motivator, lay psychologist, and public relations expert” (Malone & Caddell, 2000, p. 162).

Although the complexity of the principal’s role has evolved, Bauer and Brazer (2013) identify one constant:

The trend that remains common through changes in the principalship is the principals’ tendency to have sole responsibility for school outcomes and the strong possibility that principals will make many of their key decisions in isolation (p. 156).

Rooney (2003) reported that the principalship is lonely, and although surrounded by people all day, school principals are solely responsible for leading and facilitating the complex, demanding, and stressful work of improving achievement of all students and at the same time ensuring everyone's safety.

Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) found that professional isolation of principals is negatively correlated to work performance. Based on their study of school principals and the relation between professional isolation and work performance, they recommended a change in principals' working conditions, but to "achieve this, researchers must try to identify the primary causes of principals' isolation" (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997, p. 10). In another study of principals with fewer than three years of experience, Boerema (2011) noted that almost every principal mentioned the issue of loneliness. He concluded that the issue of principal loneliness is prevalent among principals, especially in small schools, and proposed that further studies be conducted as to the cause(s) of loneliness in the principalship. He asked whether "loneliness occurs in this position because the kinds of people that accept the position tend to work alone, or whether the power and responsibility implicit in the role isolate principals" (Boerema, 2011, p. 564).

The traditional composition of schools, particularly at the elementary level, contributes to the structural isolation of principals, in that the principal may be the only administrator assigned to a given school. As Howard and Mallory (2008) asserted, "The one-principal-one-school still exists in 21st century schools. Therefore, coping strategies to deal with professional isolation are a necessity for the 21st century principalship" (p. 9). Before school districts can identify coping strategies to address principals' professional isolation, they must first identify what factors contribute to this isolation and how this isolation impacts school principals.

The research regarding the perception, barriers, and impact of school principal isolation is limited compared to that related to teacher isolation. Bauer and Stephenson (2010) provided further elaboration:

The evolving role of the principal has garnered increased attention from a variety of groups, ranging from parents to policymakers, as it has changed over the years from that of a bureaucrat to an instructional leader who takes responsibility for every facet of the school program. The evolving role of school leaders may have implications in terms of the impact of isolation on principals that goes well beyond anything suggested in the literature on teacher isolation. (pp. 1-2)

This research study explored the phenomenon of school principal isolation. By analyzing quantitative data obtained from a survey of school principals, this study investigated perceived factors that contribute to professional isolation and the perceived impact of professional isolation on work performance. The desired outcome of this analysis was to provide practitioners and specifically school district leaders with relevant information to inform recommendations for the design and implementation of two collaborative systems: principal mentoring programs and principal professional learning communities. The underlying hypothesis is that such collaborative systems reduce isolation and provide support to principals, making the job more doable and attractive and thus, in turn, positively impacting recruiting and retention.

Research Questions

Marshall and Rossman (1999) asserted the importance of designing an overarching theoretical question that guides research with a variety of different sites and samples. The overarching theoretical question for this study is, What are the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes

of school principals in Washington State related to professional isolation? The following subquestions were designed to narrow the focus on such isolation:

1. Do school principals perceive themselves to be professionally isolated?
2. If school principals do perceive themselves as professionally isolated, what are the perceived causes of professional isolation in the school principalship?
3. What are the demographic factors associated with perceived professional isolation in the school principalship?
4. What is the perceived effect of professional isolation on school principals' work performance?
5. What type of district-level supports do school principals recommend to reduce professional isolation?
6. How do school principals perceive principal professional learning communities and/or mentoring programs as a means to reduce professional isolation?

The first research question sought to uncover whether school principals experience the phenomenon of professional isolation. The subsequent research questions were contingent on the first one being answered in the affirmative. These questions attempted to understand the perception and effects of professional isolation on elementary, secondary, novice, and veteran school principals. The questions were tailored to inform recommendations for practitioners and central office leaders when planning for two collaborative systems: principal professional learning communities and principal mentorship programs.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is general agreement in the literature that recruiting and retaining school principals is a difficult challenge. “The recruitment of outstanding individuals to serve as principals has become a challenging task for superintendents and school boards, largely because the principal’s job is so demanding” (Malone & Caddell, 2000, p. 162). Further, the demands associated with the principalship were found to be a deterrent for many qualified candidates with potential to apply for the position of school principal (Doyle & Locke, 2014). “Given the demands of the principal’s job, it is perhaps not surprising that most teachers initially want nothing to do with it: More than 80% of those surveyed said they were unlikely to pursue school leadership in the future” (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 14). Despite the demands and nearly impossible expectations placed upon them, principals are often assigned to struggling schools with little professional development or collaborative support (Schimel, 2014). Instead, school principals often work in isolation from colleagues with little opportunity to collaborate (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997; Howard & Mallory, 2008; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

One recommendation made by Doyle and Locke (2014) in their study of recruitment, placement, and retention of high quality school principals was to “make the job more manageable” (p. 35) by providing more support for them. They noted that some supports are inconsistently available to school principals. These supports include mentoring (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Daresh, 2004; Holloway, 2004), networking (Howley, Chadwick, & Howley, 2002), professional development (Hirsch & Hord, 2008; Fenwick, 2002), district-level support (Honig, 2012, 2013), and professional learning communities (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord, 2009).

School Principal Professional Isolation

In reviewing literature related to the complex and demanding role of the school principal, a theme of professional isolation emerged. School principals often feel isolated in their work, despite being surrounded by students, teachers, and parents.

Principals often feel like isolated links in the chain of command, caught somewhere between students, teachers, parents and the district office. Though they are surrounded and even overwhelmed by all of the people clamoring for their attention, they often feel deeply lonely. They are starved for the opportunity to talk openly about what their [professional] life is like. (Zellner, Ward, McNamara, Barbara, Camacho, & Edgewood, 2002, p. 5)

Boerema (2011) interviewed school principals to discover the challenges faced by novice principals and the supports they needed to be successful as leaders. He stated, “[loneliness] almost seems to be an epidemic to the office of school administrator, especially in small schools” (Boerema, 2011, p. 564). Lashway (2003) agreed that beginning principals experience isolation: “Unlike new teachers, who can usually find an empathetic colleague down the hall, principals literally have no peers in the building. These feelings of isolation can be magnified when they [principals] receive little feedback from supervisors” (p. 2).

The pressures facing elementary school principals today are many and complex, especially for novice principals (Garcia-Garduno, Slater, & Lopez-Gorosave, 2011). Hobson et al. (as cited in Garcia-Garduno et al., 2011) identified several challenges that novice elementary school principals encounter in their first year of the principalship, including “feelings of professional isolation and loneliness” (p. 101). Principals were found to experience limited interactions with other principals and administrators about complex, multifaceted, and important

issues, such as student achievement, school climate, safety, and school improvement (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Often, particularly in elementary schools, there is only one administrator at the school site, making it difficult to routinely interact or collaborate with other administrators (Barnett, 1989). Constraints on public education funding perpetuate isolation by limiting the financial resources provided to school districts for the hiring of additional assistant principals and/or administrative staff. Hiring additional administrative support is frequently cost prohibitive (Hertling, 2001). Because student enrollment determines the level of funding allocated to school districts, lower enrolled elementary schools do not typically generate enough funding to afford hiring more than one administrator. For this reason, the elementary school principal is most often alone in his or her role, and as a result most likely to experience feelings of professional isolation and loneliness.

Howard and Mallory (2008) conducted a study investigating the perceptions of isolation amongst high school principals. Their study revealed the following factors that contribute to professional isolation: (a) time demands, (b) ‘fishbowl existence’, (c) accountability demands, (d) role and duties of the principal, and (e) the relationship with the central office. High school principals in the study reported working 60–90 hours per week in order to keep up with their responsibilities, which in turn negatively impacted their social life and overall quality of life. In addition, some participants in the study reported invasions of privacy and the desire to avoid public places outside the work setting where they would be recognized by and required to interact with school patrons. Further, the accountability demands placed on high school principals with little to no support from central office leaders left many participants in the study feeling isolated and ineffective. Howard and Mallory (2008) suggested “maintaining a

professional network . . . as a solution [to isolation], even though time demands and job overload of high school principals often interfere with the potential to network” (p. 9).

Remedies for Isolation

School Principal Collaboration

Sharing expertise amongst colleagues through professional relationships is a critical attribute of an effective professional organization (Darling-Hammond, 2013). School principals must have the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, including principals in their own districts and in other districts, and central office administrators. “Principals can become allies and guides for each other. They can help each other through reflection and dialog; they can help one another create an inspiring and elegant conversation” (Zellner, Ward, McNamara, Gideon, Camacho, Edgewood, & Doughty, 2002, pp. 5-6). The School Leadership Network (SLN) (2014), affirmed,

When principals are asked about what they need in order to sustain in the profession and impact their schools, principals overwhelmingly report ongoing support with peers. They prefer learning in context-relevant, collaborative settings, where they have the ability to influence the learning agenda. (p.13)

Professional learning is heavily reliant on interactions between peer colleagues, and demands discussion, collaboration, and reflection (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Both professional learning communities and professional development for school principals have been cited in the literature as vehicles for school principal collaboration to share expertise, build professional relationships, and reflect on their professional practice (Blazer, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Zellner et al., 2002). Yet it is often challenging for school principals to find time to collaborate because of the demands of their work and their confinement

to the school site. Villani (2006) further noted,

New principals need to spend a lot of time in their buildings, and as a result, they don't have much time to meet with other new administrators who are facing the same issues or experienced principals who work in the district and could share information about the culture and history of the school system. (Villani, 2006, p. 10)

Time demands placed on the school principal present great obstacles to collaborating with other principals through professional development and professional learning communities.

Professional Development

School principals who are successful in their instructional leadership roles are life-long learners who continue to learn about leading teaching and learning (Fahey, 2012). In order for principals to sustain longevity in the profession, they “need opportunities for professional development throughout their career” (Zellner, et al., 2002, p. 6). Fahey asks “given the complexity and pressures of school leadership, what could that continued leadership learning look like?” (2012, p. 28). Traditionally, professional development opportunities are provided for school principals through workshops or conferences. DuFour and Marzano (2011) argued that the more effective way to improve “the effectiveness of individual educators is not through individualistic strategies that reinforce education isolation. . . . The far better strategy for improving adult practice is developing the results-oriented collaborative culture of a strong PLC” (p. 67).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

The andragogical model of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) describes adult learners as feeling responsible for their own decisions and learning. This feeling of ownership may cause adults to resist learning situations that they feel are imposed upon them (Knowles et

al., 2015). The PLC is a form of job-embedded professional learning for teachers and principals. PLCs are designed to enable these professionals to take ownership of their learning as collaborating professionals (DuFour et al., 2010). A PLC is comprised of a group of teachers or principals who teach or supervise common grade levels or subject areas. The group meets regularly to share expertise and improve teaching skills via a data-driven improvement cycle. The PLC process enables teachers and principals to engage in their own action research, refine their teaching and leadership strategies, and improve their knowledge and skills (DuFour et al., 2010).

PLC model. The PLC is a collaborative structure that enables educators to share information, solve problems collectively, and build the capacity of the group. PLCs are social groupings of new and experienced educators who come together over time for the purpose of gaining new information, reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs, and building their own and others' ideas and experiences in order to work on a specific agenda in order to improve students' learning in K-12 schools and other settings.

(Partners in Learning, n.d, p. 1)

The PLC model is widely employed to reduce teacher isolation and as a form of job-embedded professional development for teachers (DuFour et al, 2010). According to DuFour et al. (2010), a PLC is an ongoing collaborative process in which educators work together in recurring cycles of inquiry and action research to achieve better results or enhance learning for students.

The PLC model is a vehicle for teacher or principal professional development throughout K-12 systems that allows and enables teacher-teams and principal-teams to develop, monitor, and assess student growth goals. Knowles et al.(2015) asserted that adult learners are fully aware of their own learning needs and are motivated to participate in their learning. The PLC

model is consistent with this assertion as its collective accountability and interdependence allow educators to drive the learning process.

PLCs in practice. A suggested method to reduce isolation while building community expertise, collective learning, and individual learning is the establishment of PLCs amongst teachers in schools. Hirsch and Hord (2008) affirmed typical isolation of educators could be reduced through the implementation of PLCs and the fostering of collegiality within a school or district.

Hord (2009) defined a PLC as an opportunity to “learn deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, to develop shared meaning, and identify shared purposes related to the topic” (p. 41). The PLC is a vehicle for generating solutions to challenges in daily educational practice and, as Sadri and Bowan (2011) observed, for improving an organization’s performance:

Teams are able to produce synergy (output that is greater than the sum of the individual parts). Thus, a company can become more efficient and develop new and creative ideas by allowing employees to collaborate and work in teams. (p. 47)

Darling-Hammond (2013) stressed the need “to create and sustain productive, collegial working conditions that enable teachers to work collectively in an environment that supports learning for them and their students” (Kindle Locations 248–249). Studies indicated that students’ achievement in math, science, history, and reading increased in schools where teachers were engaged in active PLCs (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Active PLCs enable grade level or content area teachers to collaborate on their instructional practice and on student learning. Darling-Hammond stated that “strong professional learning communities require leadership that establishes a vision, creates opportunities and expectations for joint work, and finds the resources needed to support the work, including expertise and time to meet” (Kindle Locations 2041-

2042). Principals must take the lead and establish operating norms for teacher PLCs, as well as actively monitor the PLCs.

Hirsch and Hord (2008) have asserted that principals, too, must be provided the opportunity to engage in PLCs, specifically in PLCs outside of their school comprised of other principals and administrators. These PLCs might consist of principals with similar school demographics, student achievement needs, common curricular materials, professional goals, or level of experience. The overarching purpose of the PLC is to increase student achievement by increasing the knowledge and skills of the educators participating in the PLC. A principal PLC at its core is an inquiry process of reflection whereby practitioners examine school-level data to establish and assess goals (Hirsch & Hord, 2008).

Mentoring School Principals

Another suggested method for reducing principals' professional isolation is to provide mentoring for principals (Daresh, 2001; Villani, 2006; Weingartner, 2009). Because administrators most often work in isolation from peer principals, they have "different needs for ongoing support because they work away from their administrative colleagues" (Daresh, 2001, p. 26). Principal mentoring has been "gaining acceptance among states and urban districts since 2000," according to the Wallace Foundation (2007, p. 6), which asserted that investing in the growth and development of principals is critical. Caffarella and Daffron (2013) described mentoring as

an intense, caring relationship in which someone with experience works with a less experienced person to promote both professional and personal growth. Mentors model expected behavior and values, provide support, and are willing to serve as a sounding board for the person being mentored. (p. 262)

Villani (2006) defined school principal mentoring as “support from a more experienced colleague to help a beginner or someone new to a position or school system perform at a high level” (p. 19). Daresh suggested mentoring is a process of providing ongoing support to a colleague who has the potential to effectively contribute to achieving the goals of an organization (2001).

Typically, mentors possess experience in the role and demonstrate deep “craft knowledge” (Daresh, 2001, p. 3). Mentoring is most often used to provide support and guidance to a novice school principal in his or her first year or two of service (School Leadership Network [SLN], 2014). This does not, however, imply that the mentor is only sharing ideas and strategies with the mentee. Effective mentors are responsible for listening and learning alongside the mentee (Daresh, 2001). Daresh suggested that effective mentors have the following desirable characteristics:

- Highly regarded by peers and supervisors as effective practicing principals
- Demonstrate positive leadership characteristics
- Ask frequent questions rather than just providing answers
- Respect the views of others and alternate ways of doing the work
- Desire to continue to grow beyond present performance
- Model continuous learning
- Exhibit political and social awareness

According to Hall (2008) a robust, intentional mentoring program is one of the most effective means by which to ensure the success of a new school principal.

Holloway (2004) stressed the importance of mentoring novice principals and cited the absence of structural mentorship programs in most school districts. Fewer than half of the

districts in's 2000 survey provided formal principal mentoring programs" (p. 87). Daresh (2004) echoed Holloway's assertion regarding the importance of mentorship: "Mentoring is an absolutely essential part of socialization and professional formation, whether at the pre-service, induction, or in-service phase of the professional development of school administrators" (p. 502). Novice principals may consult mentors periodically as to managerial duties such as master scheduling, supervision, and other daily administrative tasks, but more importantly, a mentor can support novice principals by building upon their talents and inspiring a cycle of reflective practice by engaging in meaningful and constructive discourse (Daresh, 2004). The duties of school principal mentors may include advising, guiding, modeling, communicating, and developing the skills of new principals (Daresh, 2001). Some documented benefits of mentoring include "guidance and support during induction, increased self-confidence, encouragement to take risks to achieve goals, opportunities to discuss issues with a veteran, and [the promotion of] networking" (Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 6).

Although mentoring programs are most often provided for school principals early in their careers, both novice and experienced principals can benefit from a mentor. The literature suggested two forms of mentoring from which school principals benefit. The first type is peer mentoring, where principals are mentored, trained, and provided support by a peer or fellow principal, either in the same school district or another one. The second type of mentoring is commonly referred to as central office mentoring, where a mentor who currently serves as a central office leader provides support to the principal. This central office leader ideally has experience as a successful principal and expertise as a school leader (Blazer, 2010). Both forms of mentoring target the growth and development of the principal.

Peer-to-Peer School Principal Mentoring

Peer mentors are often experienced school principal colleagues who can provide mentees with “access to recognized school leader practitioners for advice, guidance, or ideas” (Chapman, 2005, p. 25). Peer mentors are often provided to principals when they are new to their position, likely in the first or second year of service, or to principals who are struggling and in need of additional support. Mentors meet regularly with new or struggling principals to discuss issues and problems, answer questions, and reflect on the work. The relationship between the mentor and mentee is nonevaluative in nature (Blazer, 2010); the peer mentor is someone who does not have any evaluative responsibility for the mentee. This enables the novice principal to be more candid about questions and uncertainties, and enables the mentor to tailor individualized coaching (Villani, 2006).

Providing principals with the one-on-one mentoring support of a principal colleague or peer “has been proven to be highly effective when the following components of the program are in place”:

- Tight match between the expertise, needs, leadership style, and school experience of the coach and protégé principal.
- The coach focuses specifically on improving instructional leadership.
- Sufficient training and resources are available for the coach.
- The coach’s work supports the professional development continuum; building leadership knowledge within an existing framework.
- The specific needs of the principal protégé are supported. (School Leadership Network [SLN], 2014, p. 16)

Several examples of effective or model principal mentoring programs are cited in the literature. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have introduced model-mentoring programs to support school principals (Wallace Foundation, 2007). Mentors are trained and certified to support mentees. According to the Wallace foundation, an effective peer-mentoring program begins with a serious training program to teach the needed skills and knowledge to mentor a new colleague, such as active listening, conflict resolution, and goal setting. Also according to the Wallace Foundation, “The mere fact that a person has been a successful principal is no guarantee that he or she will be an effective mentor” (p. 7).

The Extra Support for Principals (ESP) is a mentoring program that was developed to support beginning principals in the Albuquerque Public Schools. The goal and intent of ESP was to provide support to and reduce stress of new principals by providing them with a formal peer mentor relationship. “Discussing problems, concerns, and mandates with an experienced colleague can be comforting and reassuring to a new administrator who may feel somewhat isolated” (Weingartner, 2009, p. 1). The ESP program recognized that school principals have extreme demands placed on their time and designed the mentoring program to provide a safe environment for mentees and mentors, a simple process, and support. ESP expected mentors and mentees to commit 95% of their mentoring time to addressing the needs or concerns of the mentee (Weingartner, 2009).

According to the SLN (2014), “Effective coaches [mentors] likely reduce churn [turnover] given their services reduce principal isolation and build leadership competencies—two underlying causes of early departure from the profession” (SLN, 2014, p. 16). While mentoring is an effective form of support and professional development for school principals, Chapman

(2005) stated that mentoring programs are “resource intensive” (p. 25) for school districts to provide, perhaps explaining why mentoring or coaching is typically only offered to school principals during their first year or two of service. Mendels and Mitgang (2013) asserted, “Historically, mentoring and on-the-job training for principals have not been high priorities [resulting in] a sink-or-swim attitude toward school leaders, even [for] novices most in need of experienced guidance” (p. 24).

Central Office Mentoring

The provision of mentoring and support to school principals by central office administrators is recurrent in the literature. For example, Howard and Mallory (2008) reported that principals perceived various levels of support from central office leaders and superintendents as beneficial. Some principals claimed that central office leaders can serve as effective mentors to principals, and that this type of support helps reduce feelings of isolation. Honig (2012), in her study of the work practices of central office leaders dedicated to supporting principals, suggested that it is the responsibility of central office leaders to serve in mentorship roles and develop school principals as instructional leaders.

In reference to her research, Honig (2012) pointed out that her “analysis suggests the promise of central offices not contracting out to support principals’ instructional leadership or assigning frontline staff to such work, but of elevating it to an executive-level responsibility” (p. 767). According to Honig, the role of central office leaders is “prioritizing ongoing, intensive, job-embedded support to school principals to help them improve classroom instruction—roles for principals sometimes called instructional leadership” (p. 734). In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning, central office leaders must work in close collaboration with schools on the specific goal of increasing the capacity of principals to lead instructional improvement at the

school and classroom level. Honig defined the relationship of central office leaders and school principals as “learning-focused partnerships between executive-level central office leaders and principals, dedicated to helping principals grow as instructional leaders who lead powerfully for improved instruction in every classroom” (2013, p. 1).

The SLN (2014) suggested that school districts must develop or adopt structures that support the growth, learning, and development, of school principals as instructional leaders. “Currently, districts around the country are re-envisioning the role of the principal supervisor, supported in large part by the efforts from the Gates Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and the University of Washington (SLN, 2014, p. 17). Some school districts have tasked former experienced and successful principals with the role of providing one-on-one coaching, mentoring, and professional development to principals. However, central office leaders face challenges in providing the support suggested by Honig, as there is little research or guidance available as to how to provide this kind of support (Honig, 2012).

Providing mentoring for school principals, whether peer-to-peer mentoring or central office mentoring, takes a strong commitment, effort, and support on the part of district leaders and participating mentors and mentees. School districts must provide time and monetary resources for the planning and implementation of a robust orientation and induction program that includes mentor remuneration and training (Villani, 2006,). Despite the financial commitment, effective mentoring programs have the potential to improve principals’ motivation, job performance, and job satisfaction (Daresh, 2001). And “knowing that they are not alone will greatly reduce the isolation that new principals report as their primary challenge” (Villani, 2006, p. 24).

Networking

Networking with peers and colleagues is another collaborative structure that can reduce the isolation that school principals experience. O'Neill asserted,

Given the solitary nature of the position, principals need professional networks through which they can engage with fellow practitioners. . . . Collegiality among leaders offers a rich source of learning and access to the multiple sources of strength and perspective needed to be successful. (2015, p. 28)

Networking is defined as relationships and connections with peers that provide opportunities to exchange ideas (Howley, Chadwick, & Howley, 2002). Some sources of networking may include mentoring, administrative meetings, collaborative walk-throughs, membership and participation in school principal associations such as the National Association of School Secondary School Principals (NASSP) or National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and professional learning community meetings. These group opportunities might include face-to-face meetings with other principals or administrators in the school district and interdistrict collaborations, as well as distance learning technologies and summer institutes, which may be particularly supportive of rural school principals. Howley et al. (2002) cited "the importance of networking and the value of efforts that bridge the distance among isolated school administrators" for rural school principals (p. 4).

Summary

This review of literature indicated that school principals at both the elementary and secondary levels experience professional isolation. Two systems that foster principal collaboration were specifically reviewed: PLCs and principal mentoring programs. Although it is widely thought that PLCs and principal mentoring programs reduce the negative impacts of

isolation, the research related to the efficacy of either is limited. Further investigation is needed to expand the body of knowledge pertaining to this issue.

CHAPTER 4: METHOD AND DESIGN

For this study, we employed survey research methods. Survey data pertaining to professional isolation and collaboration were obtained from school principals in Washington State via an anonymous electronic survey. The purpose of the survey was to investigate school principals' perceptions of professional isolation as it relates to work performance and job satisfaction, and to inform recommendations for the design and implementation of two collaborative systems: principal professional learning communities and principal mentoring programs. The methodology for this study was comprised of (a) identifying the population sample, (b) developing a quantitative measure, (c) outlining research procedures, and (d) collecting and analyzing the survey data.

Population Sample

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported that during the 2015–2016 school year, there were 2,328 school principals employed in the state of Washington. Of the 2,328 principals, 1,385 (59.5%) were at the elementary level and 943 (40.5%) were at the secondary level (middle and high school). For added context, during the school year 2011–2012, 27% of all Washington State principals were located in urban districts, 42% were in suburban districts, 15% were in districts located in towns, and 16% were in rural school districts (Campbell, DeArmond, & Denice, 2014). All elementary and secondary school principals in Washington State, as listed in the OSPI principal directory, were invited via email to participate in the study. We invited all principals in order to obtain representation from elementary and secondary levels, as well as from suburban, urban, and rural districts and from districts of varying student enrollments.

The OSPI principal directory contained 1,972 names of school principals in Washington State. These names were uploaded into an email distribution list using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. On November 23, 2015, an email with a written introduction to the researchers and purpose of the study, including a link to an electronic anonymous survey, was sent to 1,972 school principals in Washington State. Of the 1,972 emails that were sent, 29 were deemed undeliverable because the email addresses were incorrect or did not exist at the destination domains, leaving 1,943 who were actually invited to participate.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete an anonymous electronic survey divided into three sections. The first section asked respondents to provide specific demographic information about themselves, their districts, and their schools. The second section employed two Likert scales to identify perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes related to professional isolation. The third section asked participants to respond to a yes/no checklist and open-ended questions pertaining to professional isolation and collaboration. The survey was field tested by five current and former school principals. Feedback obtained from the field test was used to refine the survey and to provide added clarity and efficiency to it. Listed below are examples of feedback provided by respondents who field-tested the survey:

1. Design – some of the survey questions were sequentially misplaced and/or needed a different format (example: multiple choice, interval scale, single response, open-ended).
2. Technical – some of the “check all that apply” questions did not allow the participant to select more than one answer.
3. Clarity – some of the responses overlapped (example: Prior to your principal position, how long did you work in a certificated [teacher, counselor, etc.] position? 3–5 years, 5–

10 years, 10-15 years, etc.). Field testers suggested that the number of years be grouped so none overlap.

In general, participants who field-tested the survey perceived the questions to be aligned to the inquiry related to school principals' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes related to professional isolation.

In its finalized form, the survey contained 29 items aligned to the research questions and organized into three distinct sections (Appendix A). The first section contained 16 demographic items. Participants were asked for demographic information about themselves, their districts, their schools, and their frequency of meeting with other school principals and administrators.

The second section of the survey employed two Likert scales to identify perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes related to professional isolation. Participants were instructed to respond to the Likert scale items as they related to their current positions as school principals. The first eight items of this section asked participants to respond to statements related to their perceptions of professional isolation, complex demands of the job, and lack of support within the principalship. Participants were asked to utilize a Likert scale (*Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, or Very Frequently*). One of these items specifically asked for the frequency, if any, with which participants considered leaving the position of school principal as a result of these perceptions. The next nine items asked participants to select *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, or Strongly Agree* in response to statements focused on attitudes and beliefs related to the impacts of collaboration, mentoring, and professional isolation on job performance and satisfaction.

The third section contained 12 items that asked participants to respond to a yes/no checklist and to open-ended questions pertaining to professional isolation and collaboration. This section

of the survey was designed to gain a more developed understanding of factors that influence professional isolation and of participants' access to guidance and support, as evidenced by support positions (e.g., assistant principal, counselor, social worker) that currently exist within their schools and/or staff members who are entrusted with information regarding professional responsibilities of the school principal (e.g., supervision and evaluation). The last two questions of this final section of the survey were open-ended and specifically asked participants to explain their thoughts on whether or not professional learning communities comprised of school administrators and/or mentoring of school principals would reduce professional isolation.

Procedures

1. The names of all elementary and secondary school principals in Washington State were obtained from the 2015 OSPI Principal Directory and uploaded into an email distribution list.
2. All Washington State school principals received via email, a written introduction to the study and a link that took them directly to an online version of the survey. Participants were not required to sign in or provide an email address, and the data were collected anonymously without an attached email of receipt.
3. Participating principals were instructed that they must electronically agree to an informed consent (see Appendix B) before beginning the survey
4. The survey window was from November 23, 2015 to December 31, 2015. A reminder email was sent to all participants on December 18, 2015, two weeks prior to the closing of the survey window.
5. Returned survey data were compiled and stored anonymously in a secured and confidential database.

Data Analysis

We gathered data administering an anonymous electronic survey that included multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. The collected data included demographic characteristics of respondents and respondents' perceptions as related to the study's research questions. We then compiled descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean, median, mode, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation, for all quantitative survey items. Qualitative data obtained from two open-ended survey questions were examined for recurring themes.

We employed descriptive statistics to summarize participants' demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, years of working experience, and employment status), professional activities, (such as meeting with other principals and district administrators and mentoring), and reasons for professional isolation. Subgroups were defined based on the demographic characteristic data collected in the survey. Cross tabulation analysis was conducted to determine whether school principals' demographic indicators (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, school type, school size, and district size) were related to their perceptions of professional isolation from other school principals. We examined the relations between perceived isolation and variables such as work performance, job satisfaction, and retention; and, finally, analyzed data from participants' responses to the open-ended questions through an inductive, theme-based analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Human Subjects/Ethical Considerations

This quantitative methods study involved school principals; therefore, a *Human Subjects Review Application* was submitted to the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division for an expedited/minimal risk review. An expedited review, as opposed to a full-board review,

was deemed justified for this study because subjects were exposed to no more than a minimal risk for participating. In addition, this study fell under federally designated category seven, which refers to the following:

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodology. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 9, 1998, Category 7)

The identity of each participant in this survey is unknown. Selected participants received via email a link that took them directly to an online version of the survey. Selected participants did not sign in nor provide an email address; the data were collected anonymously without an attached email of receipt. Participants electronically agreed to informed consent before beginning the survey.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This study examined respondents' perceptions of professional isolation in their roles as school principals. The purpose of this examination was to assist in identifying and understanding the impacts of school principal professional isolation and potential ways to mitigate this phenomenon. Specifically, this study was conducted to inform recommendations for practitioners and central office leaders when planning for two collaborative systems: principal professional learning communities and principal mentorship programs. The overarching question for the study was, What are the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of school principals in Washington State related to professional isolation? The following subquestions narrowed the focus:

1. Do school principals perceive themselves to be professionally isolated?
2. If school principals do perceive themselves as professionally isolated, what are the perceived causes of professional isolation in the school principalship?
3. What are the demographic factors associated with perceived professional isolation in the school principalship?
4. What is the perceived effect of professional isolation on school principals' work performance?
5. What type of district-level supports do school principals recommend to reduce professional isolation?
6. How might school principals perceive principal professional learning communities and/or mentoring programs as a means to reduce professional isolation?

The first research question sought to uncover whether school principals experience professional isolation. If respondents answered yes, then the subsequent questions attempted to gain a better understanding of the perceived effects of professional isolation on elementary,

secondary, novice, and veteran principals. The purpose of this chapter is to organize and present the findings of this study as related to the demographic information of the population sample and the research questions articulated above.

Demographic Information of the Population Sample

We surveyed school principals employed in Washington State and listed in OSPI's principal directory in school year 2015–2016. Of the 1,943 principals invited, 232 participated in the study for a response rate of 11.9%. Table 1 presents demographic data describing the respondents. The median age of the respondents was 48.3 years with an average of 4.7 years working in the same school and an average of 9.4 years in the principalship. There were 120 male and 112 female respondents, most of whom (87%) identified themselves as Caucasian. Other ethnicities represented in the sample included: Black (1%), Hispanic (4%), Native American (2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3%), and Multiracial/Other (3%). A significant majority of the respondents (72%) were employed as assistant principals or deans of students prior to becoming school principals.

Data provided by OSPI (S. Teasley, personal communication, March 24, 2016) indicated that this study's sample is representative of school principals in Washington State. OSPI reported that in Washington State the median age of school principals is 47 years and that the majority of Washington State's principals are Caucasian (89.6%). Other ethnicities reported by OSPI were as follows: Black (2.6%), Hispanic (3.2%), Native American (0.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2.7%), and Multiracial (1.2%).

Almost half of the respondents (49%) were elementary school administrators; 20% were high school administrators, and 18% were middle or junior high school administrators. A small percentage (5%) of the respondents indicated that they worked in a K-12 setting; 8% reported

working in “Other” grade level configurations. These data are representative of principals in Washington State as well. OSPI (S. Teasley, personal communication, March 24, 2016) reported 59% of Washington State’s principals are at the elementary level and 40.5% are at the secondary level (middle and high school). Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents represented schools with less than 300 enrolled students, 44% with 300–600 enrolled students, 21% with 601–900 enrolled students, and 14% with greater than 900 enrolled students. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the respondents are employed in rural districts, 46% in suburban districts, and 19% in urban districts throughout the state of Washington. Thirty percent (30%) of respondents are employed in school districts with less than 3,500 enrolled students, followed by 33% employed in school districts with 3,500–12,000 enrolled students, 14% in school districts with 12,001–20,000 enrolled students, and 23% in school districts with a student enrollment greater than 20,000.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Characteristics	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Individual				
Age			48.3	8.3
Years working in current school			4.7	4.1
Years as a school principal			9.4	6.8
Employed as assistant principal or dean of students prior to school principal	166	72%		
Male	120	52%		
Ethnicity				
Caucasian	202	87%		
Black	2	1%		
Hispanic	9	4%		

Characteristics	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Native American	5	2%		
Asian/Pacific Islander	7	3%		
Multiracial/Other	7	3%		
School				
Grade level				
Elementary	113	49%		
Middle/Junior High	43	18%		
High	47	20%		
K-12	13	5%		
Other	16	8%		
Free and reduced price lunch			51	24.3
Student population				
<300	45	19%		
300-600	103	44%		
601-900	49	21%		
>900	33	14%		
Missing	2	2%		
District				
Rural				
	80	35%		
Suburban	106	46%		
Urban	45	19%		
Student population				
<3500	69	30%		
3500-12000	75	33%		
12000-2000	32	14%		
>2000	53	23%		

Perceived Professional Isolation

To obtain data related to school principals' perceptions of professional isolation, participants were asked to rate the following four statements on a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = occasionally; 4 = frequently; 5 = very frequently*):

- I engage in conversations with other school principals about feeling isolated.
- I feel professionally isolated from other principals in my role as a school principal.

- I feel professionally isolated from other school administrators in my role as a school principal.
- I feel professionally isolated from central office leaders in my role as a school principal (see Figure 1).

Results indicated that 14.2% of respondents frequently or very frequently engage in conversations about feeling isolated, 31.9% frequently or very frequently feel professionally isolated from other principals, 29.7% frequently or very frequently feel professionally isolated from other school administrators, and 27.6% frequently or very frequently feel professionally isolated from central office leaders.

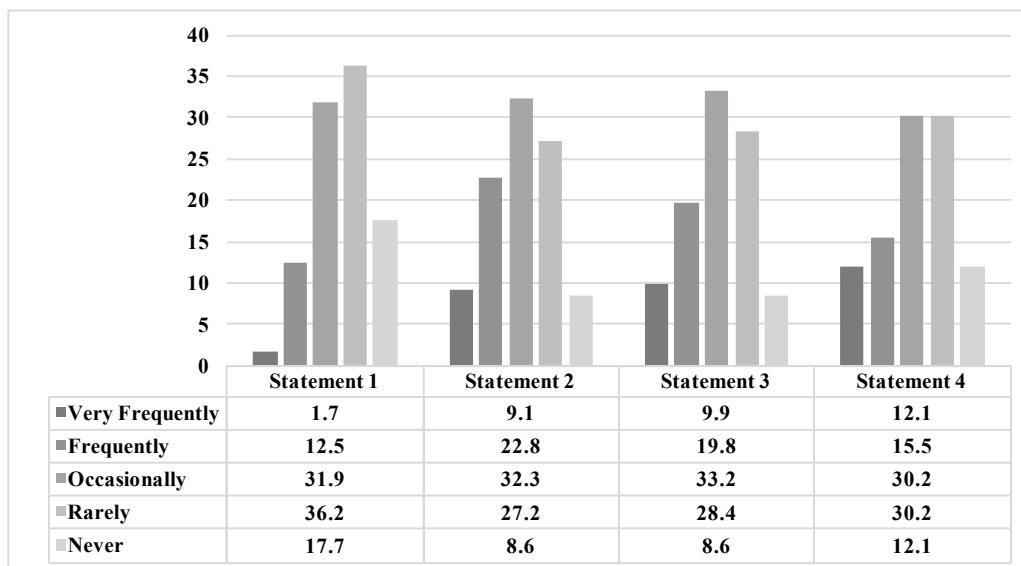


Figure 1. School principals’ perception about professional isolation.
 Statement 1= I engage in conversations with other school principals about feeling isolated.
 Statement 2= I feel professionally isolated from other principals in my role as a school principal.
 Statement 3= I feel professionally isolated from other school administrators in my role as a school principal.
 Statement 4= I feel professionally isolated from central office leaders in my role as a school principal.

Perceived Causes of Professional Isolation

Respondents were asked to identify factors that influence professional isolation in their role as a school principal by selecting from the following items: (a) physical distance between

me and my colleagues; (b) constraints on time; (c) lack of support from central office leaders; (d) lack of support from other principal colleagues; (e) lack of formal collaborative systems; and/or (f) school or district climate. If school principals did not feel professionally isolated, they were provided the option of selecting: “I do not feel isolated in my role as a school principal” (see Figure 2). Seventy-four percent (74%) of respondents identified “constraints on time” as a factor that influences professional isolation, 34% identified “lack of formal collaborative systems” as an influential factor, 25% identified “physical distance between me and my colleagues” as an influential factor. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the respondents indicated that they do not feel professionally isolated in their role as a school principal.

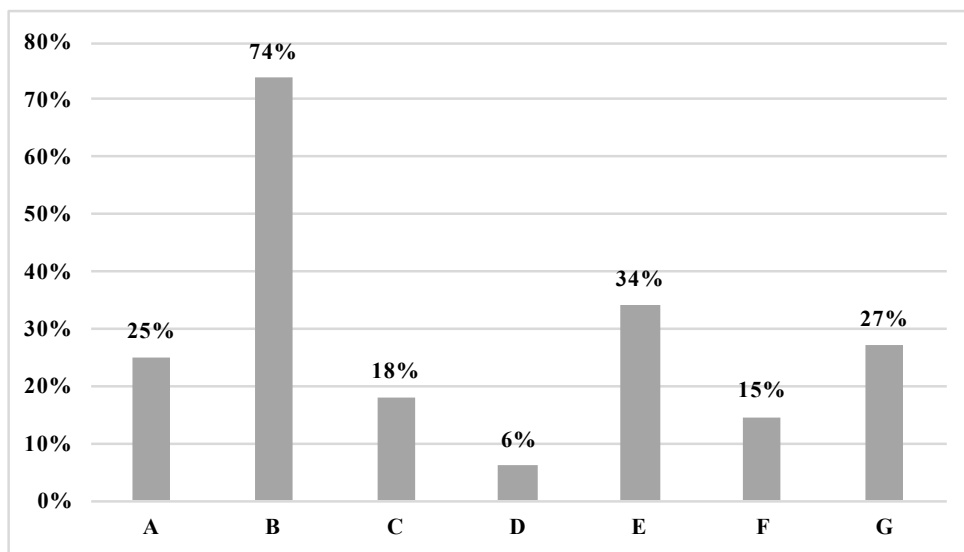


Figure 2. Perceived causes of professional isolation.

A= Physical distance between me and my colleagues; B= Constraints on time; C=Lack of support from central office leaders; D=Lack of support from other principal colleagues; E=Lack of formal collaborative systems; F=School or district climate; G=I do not feel professionally isolated in my role as a school principal.

Demographic Factors and Perceived Professional Isolation

A cross tabulation analysis was conducted to determine whether school principals' demographic indicators (i.e., school type, school size, district size, work experience, age, gender, and ethnicity) were related to perceptions of professional isolation in the principalship.

Statistically significant Chi square values were found in the tables of professional isolation by school type (Table 2), professional isolation by school size (Table 3), and professional isolation by work experience (Table 5).

In Table 2, the proportion of elementary principals who very frequently or frequently feel professionally isolated was 38% compared to 21% of middle school principals, and 17% of high school principals, $\chi^2(12, 232) = 34.2, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .22$. The null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the strength of the correlation of professional isolation and school is indicated by a Cramer V value of .222.

Table 3 indicates that 38% of principals in schools with 300 or fewer students and 37% of principals in schools with 300–600 students very frequently or frequently feel professionally isolated. In contrast, 28% of principals in schools with 601–900 students and 9% of principals in schools with 900 or more students very frequently or frequently feel professionally isolated, $\chi^2(16, 232) = 30.2, p = .017$. Again, the null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the strength of the correlation of professional isolation and school size is indicated by a Cramer V value of .180.

Table 2

Professional Isolation by Principals' School Type

		Elementary School	Middle/Junior High School	High School	Other	Total
Very Frequently	n	11	1	3	6	21
	%	10%	2%	6%	21%	9%
Frequently	n	32	8	5	8	53
	%	28%	19%	11%	28%	23%
Occasionally	n	42	11	11	11	75
	%	37%	26%	23%	38%	32%
Rarely	n	21	17	22	3	63
	%	19%	40%	47%	10%	27%
Never	n	7	6	6	1	20
	%	6%	14%	13%	3%	9%

		Elementary School	Middle/Junior High School	High School	Other	Total
Total	n	113	43	47	29	232
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=34.2 (12), $p < .001$ Cramer's V=.222

Table 3

Professional Isolation by School Size

		<300	300-600	601-900	>900	missing	Total
Very Frequently	n	4	11	4	1	1	21
	%	9%	11%	8%	3%	50%	9%
Frequently	n	13	27	10	2	1	53
	%	29%	26%	20%	6%	50%	23%
Occasionally	n	16	36	16	7	0	75
	%	36%	35%	33%	21%	0%	32%
Rarely	n	8	23	13	19	0	63
	%	18%	22%	27%	58%	0%	27%
Never	n	4	6	6	4	0	20
	%	9%	6%	12%	12%	0%	9%
Total	n	45	103	49	33	2	232
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=30.2 (16), $p = .017$ Cramer's V=.180

Based on the Chi square value of Table 4, professional isolation by district size, the null hypothesis of independence is not rejected, $\chi^2(16, 232) = 10.24, p = .85$. Results indicate that 38% of respondents working in districts with fewer than 3,500 students very frequently or frequently feel professionally isolated as compared to 27% of respondents working in districts with 3,500–12,000 enrolled students, 32% of respondents working in districts with 12,001–20,000 enrolled students, and 32% of respondents working in districts with greater than 20,000 enrolled students (see Table 4). The majority of respondents, independent of school district size, occasionally or rarely feel professionally isolated.

Table 4

Professional Isolation by District Size

		<3,500	3,500– 12,000	12,001– 20,000	>20,000	Missing	Total
Very Frequently	<i>n</i>	7	6	5	3	0	21
	%	10%	8%	16%	6%	0%	9%
Frequently	<i>n</i>	19	14	5	14	1	53
	%	28%	19%	16%	26%	33%	23%
Occasionally	<i>n</i>	20	23	10	20	2	75
	%	29%	31%	31%	38%	67%	32%
Rarely	<i>n</i>	18	23	9	13	0	63
	%	26%	31%	28%	25%	0%	27%
Never	<i>n</i>	5	9	3	3	0	20
	%	7%	12%	9%	6%	0%	9%
Total	<i>n</i>	69	75	32	53	3	232
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=10.24 (16), $p=.85$ Cramer's V=.11

In Table 5, the proportion of respondents with 0–3 years of work experience as a school principal and who very frequently or frequently experience professional isolation is 15% as compared to 32% of respondents with 4–9 years of work experience and 32% of respondents with 10 or more years of work experience. Fifty-six percent (56%) of respondents with 0–3 years of work experience indicated they rarely or never experience professional isolation, compared to 42%, of respondents with 4–9 years of work experience and 36% of respondents with 10 or more years of work experience. Based on the Chi square value of Table 5, $\chi^2(8, 230) = 19.8, p=.001$, the null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the strength of the correlation of professional isolation and work experience is indicated by a Cramer V value of .21.

Table 5

Professional Isolation by Work Experience

		Work Year			Total
		0–3y	4–9y	10>y	
Very Frequently	n	1	15	12	28
	%	2%	20%	12%	12%
Frequently	n	7	9	20	36
	%	13%	12%	20%	16%
Occasionally	n	15	20	33	68
	%	28%	26%	33%	30%
Rarely	n	23	18	29	70
	%	43%	24%	29%	30%
Never	n	7	14	7	28
	%	13%	18%	7%	12%
Total	n	53	76	101	230
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=19.8 (8), p=.001 Cramer's V=.21

In Table 6 the proportion of respondents between the ages of 27 and 40 who very frequently or frequently feel professional isolation is 43% as compared to 23% of respondents between the ages of 41 and 50, and 35 % of respondents over 51 years of age ($\chi^2(8, 228) = 12.7$, $p = .123$). With a probability value of .123, the null hypothesis of independence of professional isolation and age is not rejected.

Table 6

Professional Isolation by Age

		27–40	41–50	51>	Total
Very Frequently	n	3	8	8	19
	%	8%	8%	9%	8%
Frequently	n	14	14	24	52
	%	35%	15%	26%	23%
Occasionally	n	13	40	22	75
	%	33%	42%	24%	33%
Rarely	n	8	25	29	62

		27-40	41-50	51>	Total
Never	%	20%	26%	32%	27%
	n	2	9	9	20
	%	5%	9%	10%	9%
	n	40	96	92	228
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=12.7 (8), $p=.123$ Cramer's $V=.167$

In Table 7 the proportion of female respondents who very frequently or frequently feel professional isolation is 36% as compared to 23% of male respondents, resulting in a Chi square value of 7.93 ($p=.440$). With a probability value of .440, the null hypothesis of independence is not rejected.

Table 7

Professional Isolation by Gender

		Female	Male	Missing	Total
Very Frequently	<i>n</i>	11	10	0	21
	%	10%	8%	0%	9%
Frequently	<i>n</i>	28	24	1	53
	%	26%	20%	33%	23%
Occasionally	<i>n</i>	39	36	0	75
	%	36%	30%	0%	32%
Rarely	<i>n</i>	24	37	2	63
	%	22%	31%	67%	27%
Never	<i>n</i>	7	13	0	20
	%	6%	11%	0%	9%
	<i>n</i>	109	120	3	232
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=7.93(8), $p=.440$; Cramer's $V=.131$

In Table 8 the ethnic categories of respondents are collapsed and disaggregated into two demographic identifiers: Persons of Color and White. The proportion of participants identified as Persons of Color who very frequently or frequently felt professional isolation is 33% as compared to 32% of participants identified as White, $\chi^2(4, 232) = 4.7(p = .315)$. With a probability value of .315, the null hypothesis of independence is not rejected.

Table 8

Professional Isolation by Ethnicity

		Persons of Color	White	Total
Very Frequently	n	3	18	21
	%	10%	9%	9%
Frequently	n	7	46	53
	%	23%	23%	23%
Occasionally	n	14	61	75
	%	47%	30%	32%
Rarely	n	5	58	63
	%	17%	29%	27%
Never	n	1	19	20
	%	3%	9%	9%
		n	30	202
		%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=4.7 (4), p=.315 Cramer's V=.143

Table 9 presents Chi square values that indicate dependent relationships between the demographic variables *school size*, *school type* and *work experience* and the variable *professional isolation*. In each case the strength of correlation as indicated by Cramer V values is relatively modest (.18, .22, and .21). Also presented are Chi square values that indicate independent relationships between the demographic variables *age*, *district size*, *ethnicity*, and *gender* and the variable *professional isolation*.

Table 9

Summary of Chi Square Values Demographic Variables by Professional Isolation Tables

Variable	χ^2	p	Cramer's V	H ₀
School Size	30.2	.017	.180	Rejected
School Type	34.2	.001	.22	Rejected
Work Experience	19.8	.001	.21	Rejected
Age	12.7	.123	.167	Not Rejected
District Size	10.24	.85	.11	Not Rejected
Ethnicity	4.7	.315	.143	Not Rejected
Gender	7.93	.440	.131	Not Rejected

Perceived Professional Isolation and Work Performance

To assess the perceived effect of professional isolation on school principals' work performance, the principals were asked to rate the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale (*1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, or 5=strongly agree*):

- My work performance is negatively impacted by professional isolation.
- My job satisfaction is negatively impacted by professional isolation.
- I have considered leaving my position as a school principal due to professional isolation (see Figure 3).

Results indicate that 47.9% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that work performance is negatively impacted by professional isolation. In addition, about 48.7% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree that their job satisfaction is negatively impacted by professional isolation. Slightly more than seventy-four percent (74.5%) of respondents disagree

or strongly disagree that they have considered leaving the school principalship as a result of professional isolation.

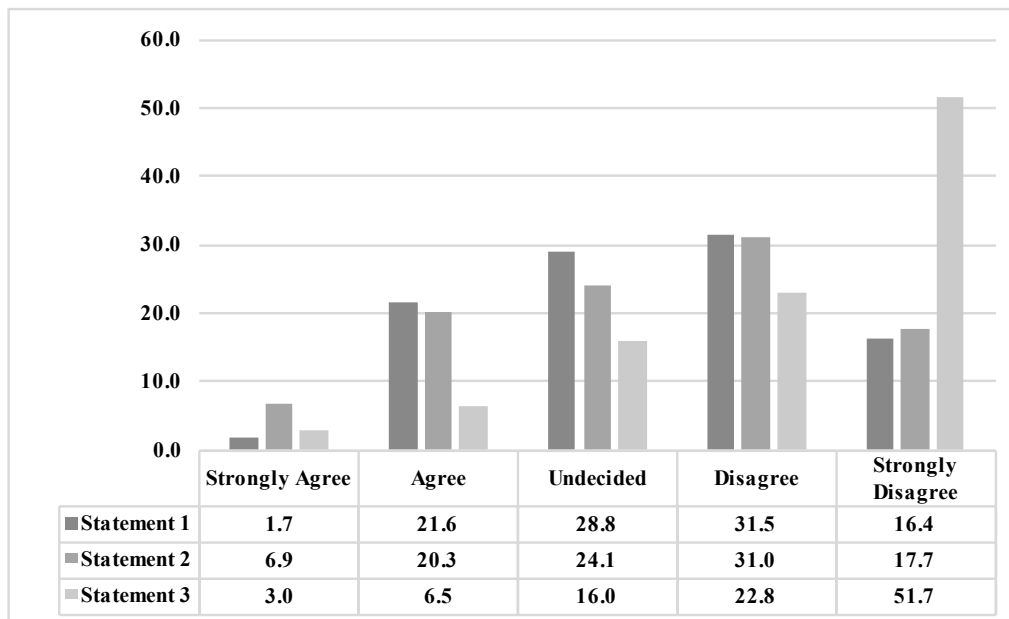


Figure 3. Perceived effect of professional isolation on work performance and satisfaction. Statement 1= My work performance is negatively impacted by professional isolation. Statement 2= My job satisfaction is negatively impacted by professional isolation. Statement 3= I have considered leaving my position as a school principal due to professional isolation.

Employing a 5-point Likert scale (*1=never; 5=very frequently*), school principals were asked to rate how often they considered leaving their position for the following reasons: (a) professional isolation, (b) complex demands of the job, and (c) lack of support. Results in Table 10 indicate that respondents most frequently consider leaving the principalship due to “complex demand” followed by “lack of support” and then “professional isolation.” Specifically, 28.8% of the respondents very frequently or frequently considered leaving due to complex demands of the job. Twenty-two percent (22%) of respondents very frequently or frequently considered leaving due to lack of support, and 9.5% considered leaving due to professional isolation.

Table 10

Reasons for Considering Leaving the Position

Category	Professional Isolation		Complex Demand		Lack of Support	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very Frequently	7	3	27	11.6	19	8.2
Frequently	15	6.5	40	17.2	32	13.8
Occasionally	37	16	68	29.3	53	22.8
Rarely	53	22.8	48	20.7	54	23.3
Never	120	51.7	49	21.1	74	31.9

District-Level Supports to Reduce Professional Isolation

School principals were provided a list of five district-level supports and asked to indicate which strategies or initiatives they believed would reduce isolation. The five district-level supports were: (a) professional learning communities comprised of school principals; (b) mentoring of school principals; (c) central office support and conversations; (d) principal team meetings; and (e) administrative walk-through or learning walks with other school principals. Results presented in Figure 4 reveal that 65.9%, of respondents believed that “professional learning communities comprised of other school principals” would reduce professional isolation; 49.1% believed that “principal team meetings” would reduce professional isolation; and 47.4% believed that “administrative walk-throughs or learning walks with other school principals” would reduce professional isolation. Slightly more than thirty-seven percent (37.5%) of the respondents indicated that they believed “central office support and conversations” would reduce professional isolation, and 35.3% indicated “mentoring of school principals” as a district-level support would reduce professional isolation.

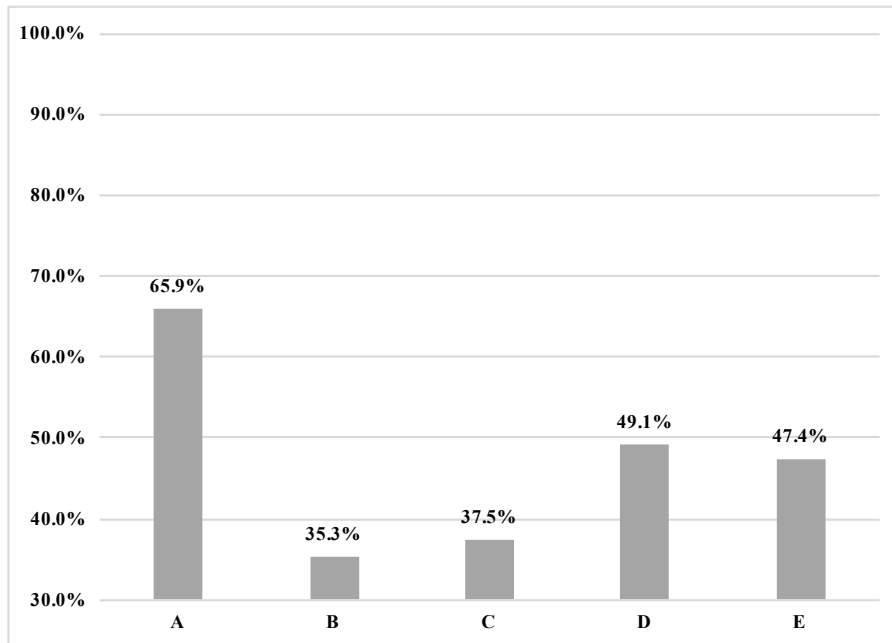


Figure 4. Perceived district strategies to reduce school principal isolation. A= Professional learning communities comprised of school principals; B=Mentoring of school principals; C=Central office support and conversations; D=Principal team meetings; E=Administrative walk through or learning walks with other school principals.

PLCs and/or Mentoring Programs and Professional Isolation

School principals were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale how often they meet with other principals or school administrators. The proportion of respondents who meet weekly with other principals or school administrators from their own district is 33.2% (see Table 11). Slightly more than fifty-eight percent (58.6%) indicated that they meet monthly with school principals from their own district. In comparison, 25.4% of the respondents indicated they meet weekly with other school administrators and 56.5% indicated they meet monthly with other school administrators. In contrast, less than 0.4% of the respondents meet weekly and 16.4% meet monthly with school principals in other districts.

Table 11

Frequency of Meeting Other Principals or School Administrators

Frequency	Other School Principals in Your District		Other School Administrators		School Principals in Other Districts	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Daily	8	3.4	11	4.7	1	0.4
Weekly	77	33.2	59	25.4	1	0.4
Monthly	136	58.6	131	56.5	38	16.4
Quarterly	4	1.7	22	9.5	55	23.7
Yearly	4	1.7	6	2.6	123	53
Missing	3	1.3	3	1.3	14	6

A statistically significant Chi square value was found, as shown in Table 12, *Frequency of Meeting with School Principals from Other School Districts by Gender*. Nine (9%) of female respondents indicated that they meet monthly with school principals from other school districts compared to 22% of male respondents. Seventeen percent (17%) of female respondents indicated that they meet quarterly with school principals from other school districts compared to 30% of male respondents; and 63% of female respondents indicated that they meet yearly with school principals from other school districts as compared to 44% of male respondents, $\chi^2(10, 232) = 24.3, p = .007$, Cramer's $V = .23$. The null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the strength of the correlation of professional isolation and work experience is indicated by a Cramer V value of .23.

Table 12

Frequency of Meeting with Principals from Other School Districts by Gender

		Female	Male	Missing	Total
Daily	<i>n</i>	1	0	0	1
	%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Monthly	<i>n</i>	10	26	2	38
	%	9%	22%	67%	16%
Quarterly	<i>n</i>	19	36	0	55
	%	17%	30%	0%	24%
Weekly	<i>n</i>	0	1	0	1
	%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Yearly	<i>n</i>	69	53	1	123
	%	63%	44%	33%	53%
Missing	<i>n</i>	10	4	0	14
	%	9%	3%	0%	6%
Total	<i>n</i>	109	120	3	232
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=24.3 (10), $p=.007$ Cramer's V=.23

Employing a 5-point Likert scale, school principals were asked to indicate how often they meet with other school principals in a professional learning community (see Figure 5). Forty-three point five percent (43.5%) of respondents report that they very frequently or frequently participate in a professional learning community; 42.7% of respondents reported that they occasionally participate; and 13.8% reported that they “rarely” or “never” participate in a professional learning community comprised of school principals.

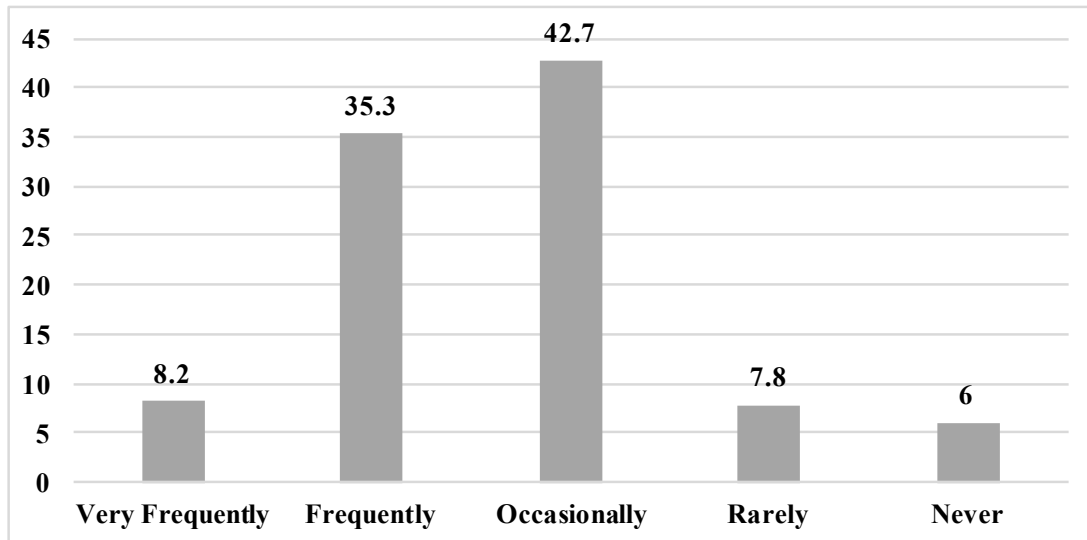


Figure 5. I participate in a professional learning community comprised of school principals.

Employing a 5-point Likert scale, school principals were asked to indicate their agreement with the following two statements: “Collaboration with my principal colleagues would decrease my sense of professional isolation” and “My level of professional isolation would be decreased if I were formally mentored by another school principal.” Figure 6 indicates that 71.1% of respondents strongly agree or agree that collaboration with principal colleagues would decrease feelings of professional isolation. In contrast, 34.4% of the respondents strongly agree or agree that feelings of isolation would be decreased if another school principal formally mentored them; 65.5% of respondents were undecided, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that professional formal mentoring would decrease professional isolation.

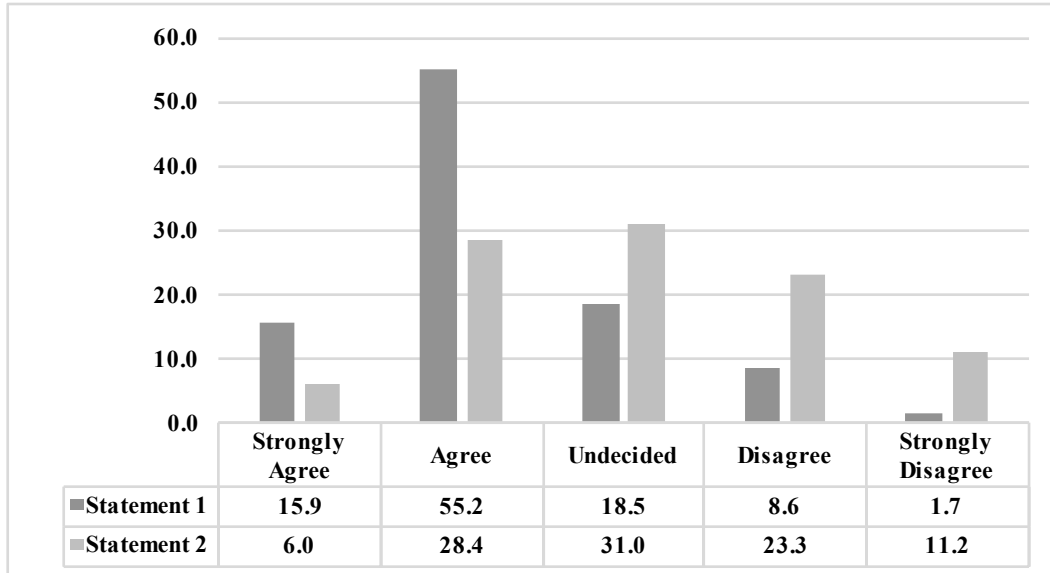


Figure 6. Perceived PLC and/or mentoring to reduce professional isolation. Statement 1= Collaboration with my principal colleagues would decrease my sense of professional isolation; Statement 2= My level of professional isolation would be decreased if I were formally mentored by another school principal.

In Table 13, a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to determine whether school principals’ years of work experience was correlated with perceptions that formal mentoring would decrease professional isolation in the school principalship. The proportion of respondents with 0–3 and 4–9 years of work experience who strongly agree or agree that formal mentoring would decrease professional isolation was 43% as compared to respondents with more than 10 years of experience at 23%, $\chi^2(10, 230) = 20.7, p = .002$, Cramer's $V = .21$. The null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the correlation between formal mentoring and decreased isolation by work experience is indicated by a Cramer’s V value of .21.

Table 13

Mentoring and Decreased Isolation by Work Experience

		Work Year			Total
		0–3y	4–9y	10>y	
Strongly Agree	n	5	7	2	14
	%	9%	9%	2%	6%
Agree	n	18	26	21	65
	%	34%	34%	21%	28%
Undecided	n	18	14	38	70
	%	34%	18%	38%	30%
Disagree	n	6	19	29	54
	%	11%	25%	29%	24%
Strongly Disagree	n	6	9	11	26
	%	11%	12%	11%	11%
Missing	n	0	1	0	1
	%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Total	n	53	76	101	230
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=20.7 (10), $p=.002$ Cramer's V=.21

Table 14 shows school principals' years of work experience and their frequency of participating in a professional learning community with other school principals. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants were asked to report the frequency of participating in a professional learning community. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of respondents with 0–3 years of work experience as a school principal indicated that they very frequently or frequently participate in a professional learning community; this compares to 40% of respondents with 4–9 years of experience, and 40% with more than 10 years of work experience, $\chi^2(8, 230) = 17.4, p = .003$. The null hypothesis of independence is rejected; the strength of the correlation of years of work experience and participation in a professional learning community indicated by a Cramer's V of .20.

Table 14

Participated in Professional Learning Community by Work Experience

		Work Year			Total
		0–3y	4–9y	10>y	
Very Frequently	N	8	5	6	19
	%	15%	7%	6%	8%
Frequently	N	22	25	34	81
	%	42%	33%	34%	35%
Occasionally	N	16	35	47	98
	%	30%	46%	47%	43%
Rarely	N	5	2	11	18
	%	9%	3%	11%	8%
Never	N	2	9	3	14
	%	4%	12%	3%	6%
Total	N	53	76	101	230
	%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note. Chi (df)=17.4 (8), p=.003 Cramer's V=.20

Open-Ended Responses

To further examine perceptions of professional learning communities and/or mentoring programs as a means to reduce professional isolation, school principals were asked two open-ended questions:

1. Would participation in professional learning communities comprised of school administrators (e.g., principals, assistant principals, deans of students, administrative assistants) reduce your level of professional isolation? Yes or No? Please explain your answer.
2. Would mentoring for your role as a school principal reduce your level of professional isolation? Yes or No? Please explain your answer.

The open-ended responses from both questions were analyzed through an inductive theme-based analysis.

PLCs

There were a total of 197 participants who responded to the first open-ended question related to perceptions of school principals' engagement in professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means to reduce professional isolation. In response to the dichotomous yes or no question, 155 respondents indicated that school principal engagement in PLCs would reduce professional isolation. One respondent shared, "Yes, it would reduce the feeling of being isolated. Having others to discuss and share ideas with would feel great." Another school principal noted, "Participating in the county principal learning community has been a tremendous support. We meet six times during the school year and choose topics via email. While 6:30 a.m. is early, it is truly worth it!" Another mentioned PLCs' potential to reduce isolation, "because it could give us [principals] an environment to talk about our work, not just a meeting to discuss agenda items." Another respondent shared, "I meet formally on a weekly basis with my assistant and instructional coach—this is the most productive and rewarding part of the job because we are focused on our next steps toward improving teaching and learning." Themes that emerged from the data included the value placed on job-embedded learning and professional development focused on student achievement, and the importance of data analysis driving the PLC process for principals. Of the 155 "yes" responses, 28 respondents cited professional learning communities as a way to foster the learning of school principals and providing professional development. One respondent shared,

We currently have principal PLCs along with Instructional Rounds and these venues create opportunities at least twice a month to have professional collaboration around teaching and learning in our buildings. They are very helpful and create a great support system for us in terms of learning and growing from each other. It also helps us all go in

the same direction, which optimizes professional development opportunities from the district office.

Twenty-six (26) respondents conveyed that PLCs comprised of other school principals and administrators would not reduce professional isolation and 16 participants responded “maybe” or “depends.” Of the 26 respondents who stated that school principal PLCs would not reduce professional isolation, eight indicated that PLCs would only add to already excessive demands on their time. One respondent stressed, “No. I don’t believe that having more meetings in an already too full schedule would help.” Eight of the 26 respondents felt that PLCs would not reduce their isolation because they already participated in administrative and/or principal meetings. One respondent stated, “No, mostly since in my district I am one of four high school principals and we meet regularly.” Of the respondents who reported “maybe” or “depends,” a commonly expressed concern related to the ultimate relevance and the overall structure of the PLC (i.e., agenda, make-up of the participants, engagement of participants, and focus of the meeting). Stated one participant, “They [PLCs] could, if they were relevant and provided meaningful ways for principals to interact.” Finally, six of 26 respondents stated that they do not feel professionally isolated, and therefore the addition of a principal PLC would not reduce their isolation.

School Principal Mentoring

There were 198 participants who responded to the second open-ended question focused on perceptions of school principal mentoring as a means to reduce professional isolation. Themes and patterns that emerged from the data included a bimodal distribution of responses to the yes/no question, “Would mentoring for your role as a school principal reduce your level of professional isolation?” Specifically, 102 respondents indicated that school principal mentoring

would reduce professional isolation and 71 respondents indicated that it would not. Of the 102 “yes” responses, 23 respondents indicated that school principal mentoring is important for novice principals or principals new to a district as a means of reducing professional isolation. One respondent stated, “Principals in the first few years should have a mentor, and principals with more experience should either be mentors or operate in professional communities to foster professional belonging.” Seven respondents reported that school principal mentoring by central or district office administrators would reduce professional isolation. One respondent shared that he or she has “support from the district office and they have a better understanding of the unique qualities of my school.”

Seventy-one (71) respondents conveyed that school principal mentoring would not reduce professional isolation; 25 respondents responded “maybe” or “depends.” Of the 71 respondents who indicated that school principal mentoring would not reduce professional isolation, 24 expressed that they were experienced principals and did not need a mentor. One respondent stressed that he or she has been doing the job of school principal “long enough to get answers to questions that are new.” Another respondent, self-identified as “late career,” reported that school principal mentoring would not benefit him or her but would benefit “newer principals in their first 3–5 years” of the principalship. Of the 25 respondents who reported “maybe” or “depends,” a consistent theme expressed in their responses was that the benefit of mentoring is contingent on the qualifications of the mentors (i.e., skills, knowledge, and experience, especially previous work experience as a school principal), and the overall structure and quality of the mentorship program (e.g., time constraints, meeting locations).

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Professional Isolation of Elementary School Principals

The first question this study asked is, do principals, and specifically elementary school principals in the state of Washington, feel professionally isolated? The findings of the study indicate that a significant percentage of them do. These findings support Hobson et al.'s assertion that elementary school principals are challenged by professional isolation in their daily work (as cited in Garcia-Garduno et al., 2011). Thirty-eight percent (38%) of elementary school principals surveyed reported feeling professionally isolated either very frequently or frequently, and an additional 37% of elementary school principals reported occasionally feeling professionally isolated. In fact, only 6% of elementary school principals surveyed reported never feeling professionally isolated. In comparison, 21% of middle school or junior high school principals reported feeling isolated very frequently or frequently, while even fewer high school principals, only 17%, reported very frequently or frequently feeling professionally isolated. A Chi square test of school type by professional isolation [$\chi^2(12, 232) = 34.2, p < .001$] indicated that there is a statistically significant association between these two variables, and the association is characterized by a greater proportion of elementary principals feeling professionally isolated than secondary principals.

An obvious difference between elementary schools and secondary schools is school size; elementary schools are typically a fraction of the size of high schools. Consequently, it is not surprising that the relation of school size to professional isolation is very similar to the relation of school type to professional isolation. Thirty-seven percent (37.3%) of principals in schools with 600 or fewer students reported very frequently or frequently feeling professionally isolated. In contrast, 28% of principals in schools with 601–900, and 9% of principals in schools with 900 or

more students reported very frequently or frequently feeling professionally isolated. Chi square test of school size by professional isolation [$\chi^2(16, 232) = 30.2, p = .017$] indicated that there is a statistically significant association between these two variables, and the association is characterized by a greater proportion of principals of smaller schools feeling professionally isolated than principals of larger schools. Although some of these small schools are no doubt rural and magnet secondary schools, in the State of Washington it is safe to assume the overwhelming majority are elementary schools. The finding that elementary principals feel higher levels of professional isolation takes on added importance in that elementary school principals represent the largest group of principals in Washington State (Campbell, DeArmond, & Denise, 2014) and were the largest group to participate in this study.

School size is understandably a primary driver of how schools are staffed. Typically, the small size of an elementary school results in only one administrator being assigned to the school. Usually, student enrollment at an elementary school must exceed 600 students before an assistant principal is assigned to it (Hertling, 2001). Elementary school principals are often the lone administrator in the school without an assistant principal or dean of students with whom to collaborate. If in fact having multiple administrators in a school reduces feelings of professional isolation, then it is tenable that the interaction between school size and the differentiated staffing of schools contributes to a higher incidence of reported professional isolation in elementary and small schools.

However, it would be difficult for pedagogical reasons to argue that elementary schools should be made larger in order to drive higher staffing levels of administrators at each site. It would be equally difficult to justify the expense of adding administrators to each site for the primary purpose of reducing principal isolation independent of costs. However, as an interesting

side note, with the introduction of the new, more demanding teacher evaluation system in Washington State, many school districts identified a need for additional administrative support for elementary schools. More than 300 assistant elementary principal positions have been created statewide since the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system in 2012–2013 (AWSP, 2015). These positions were created to support principals because they are required to spend additional time on teacher evaluation and school improvement activities. Given these changing conditions, it could be informative to conduct a second analysis of this study's data and/or a future study comparing the perceptions of elementary principals with assistant principals to those of elementary principals without assistant principals while controlling for school size.

However, the question remains as to whether or not having an assistant principal at the elementary level would reduce professional isolation for elementary school principals. In the meantime, it would seem important to explore other avenues for elementary school principal collaboration and reduce principal isolation.

Time Demands Placed on Principals

The second question that this study asked is, What are the perceived causes of professional isolation in the school principalship? Seventy-four percent (74%) of respondents perceived constraints on time as the primary cause of their isolation. The second most mentioned cause of professional isolation was lack of formal collaborative systems, which was cited by 34% of respondents. These two causes of isolation have been demonstrated to interact as the principals indicate that they are too busy to professionally collaborate. In Howard and Mallory's (2008) study, high school principals reported working 60–90 hours per week, leaving little time to engage in their own personal and professional development or to collaborate. Their study also connected demands on time to the isolation of secondary school principals.

It is well known that school principals have complex and demanding jobs with limited time to be away from the daily work pressures directly connected to their assigned schools. Time constraints and time demands placed on principals are repeatedly cited by authors as one of the greatest obstacles in structuring professional learning and collaborative opportunities for school principals (Howard & Mallory, 2008; Rooney, 2003; SLN, 2014; Villani, 2006).

It is critical that central office leaders consider existent time demands placed on school principals before developing systems of collaboration. Additional time demands may in fact intensify the negative impacts of professional isolation. Respondents of the survey were asked to identify factors that influence professional isolation. One respondent noted that “principals are busy and don’t often attend collaboration meetings with others.” Another respondent reported feeling “occasionally. . .isolated and it is largely due to time constraints.” Time demands placed on school principals is an area in need of further study. The first imperative of creating teacher PLCs is that time must be provided for the teachers to meet. Similarly, time must be provided for principals to meet. The availability of time must be considered when recommending systems to mitigate isolation and foster collaboration, including PLCs and mentoring of school principals. Creating available time may require a revision of the principal’s job responsibilities and/or adding administrative support.

Demographic Factors and Professional Isolation

Work experience

The third question this study asked is, What are the demographic factors associated with perceived isolation in the school principalship? The association of number of years of work experience as a school principal with professional isolation was statistically significant [$\chi^2(8, 230) = 19.8, p = .001$]. Respondents of this study with 4–9 and 10 or more years in the

principalship more frequently felt professionally isolated than did those with 0–3 years of experience. The proportion of respondents with 0–3 years of experience and who very frequently or frequently experience professional isolation was 15% as compared to 32% of respondents with 4–9 and with 10 or more years of work experience. Principals with 3 or fewer years of work experience felt less professionally isolated than principals with more years of experience.

Novice school principals typically receive more monitoring from central office administrators than do more veteran principals. This monitoring may be in the form of added supervision, and it may be in the form of added support and guidance through mentoring by veteran principals and/or central office administrators. As novice school principals become more experienced, the level of support is usually withdrawn. This may explain why respondents with 0–3 years of work experience reported feeling less isolated. The SLN (2014) reported that mentoring is most often used to provide support and guidance to a new school principal in his or her first year or two of service. Chapman (2005) referred to mentoring programs as an intensive resource, which may hinder school districts from offering continued mentorship or coaching to novice principals beyond their first few years of service. The results of this study related to work experience and professional isolation are consonant with the literature.

A higher percentage of early career principals reported participating in PLCs than did later career principals. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of respondents with 0–3 years of experience reported very frequently or frequently participating in PLCs, while only 40% of principals with 4–9 years or greater than 10 years of experience participate in PLCs. This lower percentage of veteran principals who reported participating in PLCs could, in part, account for higher levels of professional isolation reported by that group. In addition to ongoing mentoring support beyond

the first three years of the principalship, veteran principals may profit from participation in PLCs.

Because the majority of respondents with more than four years of work experience reported feeling professionally isolated, it is important for central office leaders to consider ongoing support for school principals that extends beyond their first few years of service. Budgetary constraints (e.g., stipends for mentors, contracting services) often hinder school districts from providing such ongoing support; however, Honig (2012) asserted that central office leaders can serve as effective mentors to principals. In fact, Honig discourages central office leaders from contracting out to support principals with their work as instructional leaders. Rather, she recommends that central office leaders serve as mentors to school principals, and to extend opportunities to collaborate with peers that are job embedded, focused on the improvement of instruction, student growth, and achievement, and minimize additional costs (e.g., PLCs). As mentors, central office leaders would be able to differentiate their level of support based on the experience and unique needs of each school principal. As one respondent of the survey stated, “I have support from the district office and they have a better understanding of the unique qualities of my school.”

Gender

The association of gender with professional isolation was not statistically significant [$\chi^2(8, 230) = 7.93, p = .440$]. However, female respondents indicated that they meet less frequently with school principals from other school districts. Nine (9%) of female respondents indicated that they meet monthly with school principals from other school districts compared to 22% of male respondents. Seventeen percent (17%) of female respondents indicated that they meet quarterly with principals from other districts compared to 30% of male respondents; and

63% of female respondents indicated that they meet yearly with principals from other districts as compared to 44% of male respondents, $\chi^2(10, 232) = 24.3, p = .007$, Cramer's $V = .23$. Further research or investigation is needed to determine why female principals meet less frequently with principals from other districts.

Principals' Perceptions of Work Performance and Job Satisfaction

The fourth question this study asked is, What is the perceived effect of professional isolation on school principals' work performance? The results of this study indicated that most school principals do not perceive professional isolation as having a negative impact on their work performance. However, almost one in four (23.3%) respondents agree or strongly agree that professional isolation negatively impacts their work performance. In contrast, almost half of the respondents, 47.9%, disagreed or strongly disagreed that professional isolation negatively impacts their work performance. Additionally, 49% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that professional isolation negatively impacts their job satisfaction, and 24.1% were undecided. In comparison, only 20.3% of the respondents agreed and 6.9% strongly agreed that professional isolation negatively impacts their job satisfaction.

Bauer and Brazer (2013) studied the effects of isolation on the job satisfaction of new principals and found a statistically significant relationship between isolation and job satisfaction. However, the results of this study indicate that professional isolation may not affect job satisfaction as negatively as previously thought. In fact, this study revealed that a relatively small percentage of principals consider leaving the principalship because of professional isolation; only 9.5% of respondents reported that they very frequently or frequently consider leaving the position due to professional isolation, compared to 28.8% who reported that they very frequently or frequently consider leaving the position due to complex job demands. The

results of this study suggest that despite feelings of professional isolation, school principals are generally satisfied with their work performance and would not consider leaving their positions due to professional isolation. If one's aim is to retain principals and reduce turnover, energies might be better directed if the primary focus were placed on reducing the complex job demands and time constraints placed on principals, rather than on reducing professional isolation.

Professional isolation may be a symptom stemming from complex job demands and time constraints. Similarly, mentoring and PLCs may only reduce professional isolation to the extent they assist in reducing the complex job demands and time constraints.

PLCs and Mentoring: Perceived Impact on Professional Isolation

The sixth question this study asked is, How do school principals perceive principal PLCs and/or mentoring as a way to reduce professional isolation? The findings of the study indicate that 65% of respondents perceive PLCs as a means of reducing professional isolation compared to 35% who perceive mentoring as a means of reducing professional isolation.

PLCs as a District-Level Support

Participants were provided a list of district-level supports and asked to indicate which strategies or initiatives would reduce professional isolation. Almost sixty-six percent (65.9%) of respondents indicated that PLCs comprised of school principals would reduce professional isolation. Of the strategies and initiatives that were provided to respondents, PLCs were most frequently identified as a means to reduce professional isolation. Slightly more than seventy-one percent (71.1%) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that collaboration with their principal colleagues would decrease their sense of isolation. Principals were asked to indicate how often they meet with other principals in a professional learning community. More than

forty-three percent (43.5%) of respondents reported that they frequently or very frequently meet in a PLC, while 42.7% reported that they occasionally do.

PLCs are cited in the literature as vehicles to reduce isolation of teachers (DuFour et al., 2010; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Hirsch & Hord, 2008; Howard & Mallory, 2008), and almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents in this survey indicated that principal PLCs would reduce isolation of principals as well. Eighty-six percent (86.5%) of the respondents reported at least occasionally participating in PLCs.

The PLC model has been used as a vehicle for principal professional development throughout all levels of the P-12 systems because it allows teams of principals to learn together and then apply that learning at the school level. PLCs support principals in the complex work of increasing student achievement by establishing collective accountability and fostering collaboration among the members of the learning community (Hirsch & Hord, 2008). Given the level of affirmation by principals in this study that PLCs reduce professional isolation and the percentage of respondents already participating in PLCs, it appears that principal PLCs are viable and to some extent affordable. There is an apparent untapped potential to reduce professional isolation by increasing PLC opportunities and in turn increasing the percentage of principals who frequently participate in PLCs. All of this is with the caveat that time for PLCs to meet must be provided.

Hord and Hirsch (2008) noted that PLC structures provide tremendous benefits to principals. When principals convene PLCs, “the typical isolation of staff members is reduced and they gain collegiality and the help and support of other educators.” (p. 30). There are several ways to organize PLCs for principals. Whether principals participate in a district-based or community-based PLC, they benefit in numerous ways including: increased satisfaction,

professional development, and support for student achievement. Hord and Hirsch suggested that PLCs for principals be organized by factors such as experience of the principal, content needs, problems of practice, area of interest, and perhaps the most effective by student performance goals.

Mentoring as a District-Level Support

Thirty-five percent of respondents identified mentoring as a strategy or initiative to reduce the professional isolation of principals. Of five school district supports—PLCs, central office support and conversations, principal team meetings, and administrative walk throughs or learning walks with other school principals, and mentoring—the least identified was mentoring. However, close to 35% of respondents did identify “mentoring of school principals” as a district-level support that may reduce professional isolation. These data suggest that school principals generally do not view mentoring as an effective means to reduce professional isolation; or the data may reflect a resistance to mentoring independent of its effect on professional isolation. In any event, these data were unexpected, and open-ended responses were examined for more detail as to why mentoring was identified by a lower percentage of principals than other district-level supports.

In response to the open-ended question focusing on perceptions of school principal mentoring as a means to reduce professional isolation, almost 40% of respondents, 78 out of 198, agreed that mentoring of school principals could reduce professional isolation. Twenty-three respondents (11.6%) qualified their response by indicating that mentoring should focus on new principals or principals new to a district. As one respondent stated, “I’ve mentored other principals over the years and for new principals, mentoring is paramount to their success in the role.” These respondents’ views coincide with Villani’s (2006) definition of school principal

mentoring, which stresses that support should come from “a more experienced colleague to help a beginner or someone new to a position or school system” (p. 19). In addition, the respondents’ views are consonant with the SLN’s (2014) assertion that mentoring is most used to provide support and guidance to new school principals in their first few years of service.

Some respondents (12.6%) noted that the effectiveness of “mentoring of school principals” is dependent on the qualifications of the mentor. Daresh (2001) suggested a set of “qualifications” for a principal mentor:

- Regarded by peers as an effective practicing principal
- Demonstrates positive leadership
- Asks frequent questions rather than providing answers
- Respects the views and professional decisions of others
- Desires to improve their practice
- Models life-long learning
- Exhibits political and social awareness

The Wallace Foundation (2007) stressed that effective mentoring programs begin with an intense training program that provides principal mentors with the needed skills and knowledge to be effective.

In practice, it is likely that many principals have observed, if not experienced, a mentor who did not possess the qualifications or training described by Daresh and The Wallace Foundation. As one respondent shared, “I have worked with a coach [mentor] who wasn’t ever a principal and also worked with a coach [mentor] who was. It was so much more beneficial working with a coach [mentor] who had been a principal.” If mentoring is adopted by a school district as a strategy or initiative to reduce professional isolation, then careful attention must be

paid to the quality of the design and implementation. In addition, school districts should not be surprised if the introduction of mentoring is not met with universal support.

CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The first research question sought to uncover whether school principals experience the phenomenon of professional isolation. The subsequent questions attempted to understand the perception and effects of professional isolation on elementary, secondary, novice, and veteran principals. These questions were specifically tailored to inform recommendations for practitioners and central office leaders in order to reduce the perceived professional isolation of principals. Given the findings of this study, we offer the following recommendations to specifically address school principal professional isolation.

Reducing Professional Isolation

We recommend that higher levels of support be provided to school principals beyond their first few years of service in the principalship. Since support, such as mentoring, is more readily available for novice principals, we suggest that school districts consider ways to offer ongoing professional development and assistance to principals with 4–9 years of work experience. Due to the complex nature of the work of school principals, it is likely that it will take more than the first one or two years of service for the principal to feel confident and proficient in all facets of his or her work, especially in the area of instructional leadership.

Opportunities, such as professional development, PLCs, and support may be equally important for later career school principals with 4–9 years of experience and beyond. Providing them with support and opportunities to collaborate with a central office leader might be one way of reducing professional isolation. Honig (2013) suggested the relationship between central office leaders and school principals can be a learning-focused partnership whereby the central office leader is dedicated to helping the principal grow as an instructional leader in an effort to improve the quality of instruction. This support must be specifically tailored for the principal

based on his or her experience, skills, expertise, areas of growth, and goals. Dedicating a central office leader to provide support and guidance may help mitigate professional isolation during those years following initial induction programming.

Secondly, since principals at smaller schools, and specifically elementary schools, generally report feeling more isolated than their colleagues in larger secondary schools, we recommend that collaborative opportunities and networking be targeted for them. One respondent of this study said, “It's the day-to-day isolation that greatly impacts me. I would love to have a colleague to work with; be an admin team. I've had this in the past at the elementary level and it is a game-changer.” While it is likely not feasible to hire assistant principals for all elementary schools, it is reasonable to foster collegiality amongst the administrative team. Fostering such a team requires opportunities for principals to establish relationships and trust. Frequent opportunities for elementary school principals to collaborate with other school principals and central office leaders can reduce professional isolation. Examples of these collaborative opportunities might include networking, administrative retreats, PLCs with other principals, and/or administrative team walk-throughs. These opportunities are particularly critical for elementary principals and those who work as the sole administrator in the school. Depending on the collaborative structure employed, resources and training may need to be provided for principals to enhance their participation and ensure maximum benefits.

Given the findings of this study, the following more detailed, specific recommendations are offered for practitioners and central office leaders when planning for two collaborative systems that may reduce professional isolation of school principals: principal professional learning communities and principal mentorship programs.

PLCs

We recommend that school districts or external principal associations, such as the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), design and implement a PLC structure for principals to collaborate on student achievement, leadership, and problems of practice experienced in their daily work (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord & Hirsch, 2008). School principals benefit from talking and listening to job-alike peers and central office administrators. Principals and central office administrators may be organized into PLCs by school demographics, content needs or interests, or level of experience of the principal (Hord & Hirsch, 2008).

Regardless of the topic of study, the PLC must primarily focus on achievement data that make visible students' academic performance. The PLC must employ a cycle of inquiry and provide opportunity for principals to learn, apply new knowledge, reflect, and share data with principal colleagues (Hord & Hirsch, 2008). Because principals deal with like issues in their work, the PLC structure can provide collaboration and support for leaders facing similar challenges. The PLCs structure is a support system for school principals with yet untapped potential to mitigate their professional isolation. However, a PLC cannot be just an "add-on"; it must be job embedded, and necessary additional time for the principals' participation must be identified.

Mentoring

We recommend school districts or external principal associations provide mentoring for novice principals in their first and second year of service and ongoing mentoring support for principals with 4–9 years of experience in the principalship. Mentoring support is traditionally provided to school principals in their first year or two of service (Daresh, 2004; Villani, 2006; Weingartner, 2009). However, school principals can benefit from mentoring support beyond

those years. Findings from this study suggest that principals with 4–9 years of experience feel that mentoring may help reduce their sense of isolation. Mentors may be other school principals or central office leaders within the district or outside of the district who previously served as principals. Principals and central office leaders within the district can assist principals with the norms and culture of the school district.

It is critical that those who serve as mentors have significant experience as an effective school principal, possess strong skills, specifically instructional leadership skills, and have deep craft knowledge (Villani, 2006). Formal mentor training is recommended for any principal or central office administrator, serving as a mentor, in order to effectively meet the needs of the mentee principals (Daresh, 2001; Villani, 2006). Mentoring can be a support structure for principals that mitigates professional isolation.

Additional details and specificity on principal PLCs and mentoring for school district implementation can be found in Appendix C.

Limitations

The fact that school principals perceive themselves as professionally isolated is not entirely surprising. Self-report scales, such as the Likert scales used in this study, rely on perceptions and descriptions of the individual participants, and may lack accuracy. While this study demonstrates that school principals may perceive themselves as isolated and that collaboration with other school principals may mitigate the perceived isolation, it does not in any way evaluate the effectiveness of the school principals surveyed or the effect of collaboration on professional isolation. Although a representative sample was achieved, a much larger sample including school principals outside of the state of Washington would be needed to truly make these results representative of school principals.

Although this study yields important analysis and implications for research related to principals' professional isolation and lays the foundation for future works, it has several limitations. First, data collection was limited to the administration of an online survey. A focus group comprised of school principals might provide deeper insight and clarity to the survey data, providing additional recommendations for collaborative structures (Berg & Lune, 2012). The use of focus groups enables researchers to gain a better understanding of their inquiry through facilitated discourse with selected participants (Del Rio-Roberts, 2011).

In addition, the survey was sent to all school principals listed in OSPI's 2015 Principal Directory; however, we discovered that some principals were not represented in the directory. The OSPI directory did not include every school principal in Washington State. We concluded that principals were missing from the directory because of recent changes in school assignment and/or delays in school districts reporting updated information to OSPI. Finally, the survey was sent electronically to participants and results were collected anonymously. Since the results were collected anonymously, participants did not have the option of saving the survey to finish it at a later time. Participants' may have felt rushed while responding to the survey since it had to be completed in one sitting. Also, participants were able to submit the survey multiple times; however, it is highly unlikely that this occurred.

In any event, generalizing the results of this study to other populations, such as principals in other states, should be undertaken with great care. The demographics and several of the educational initiatives of Washington State are not shared by many other states.

Suggestions for Further Research

As previously mentioned, a future study comparing the perceptions of elementary principals with assistant principals to elementary principals without assistant principals, while

controlling for school size, could be informative. In addition, a mixed methods approach using an explanatory sequential design is a suggested methodology for further research related to this study. Creswell's (2015) definition of an explanatory sequential design is "to begin with a quantitative strand and then conduct a second qualitative strand to explain the quantitative results" (p. 38). The quantitative strand associated with this recent study is survey data; therefore, an accompanying qualitative strand may be data collected from a focus group comprised of school principals.

In response to the survey data, participating principals within the focus group may be interviewed for the purpose of obtaining qualitative information about their perceptions of professional isolation and experiences with professional learning communities and mentoring. The focus group's qualitative responses from the interviews could provide a deeper understanding of the quantitative data collected from this study. For example, a large majority of respondents in this study reported that job performance and satisfaction are not negatively impacted by professional isolation. However, participants indicated that the primary reason for leaving the principalship is "complex demand" followed by "lack of support." Further, a large majority of participants perceived the primary cause of professional isolation as "constraints on time" followed by "lack of formal collaborative systems." "Constraints on time" is likely associated with "complex demand"; similarly "lack of formal collaborative systems" is likely associated with "lack of support."

Finally, 51.7% percent of respondents indicated that they strongly disagreed that they have considered leaving the principalship due to professional isolation. Another 22.8% disagreed that they have considered leaving the principalship. In comparison only 9.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had considered leaving the principalship due to

professional isolation. The respondents in this study reported an average tenure of 4.7 years in their current positions, 9.4 years as a school principal. The literature review suggested that turnover in the principalship is high, due in part to professional isolation. The findings in this study belie the notion that the churn is high or that professional isolation significantly contributes to turnover. These issues should be explored in future studies using an explanatory research design.

Conclusion

School principals play a key role in the success and overall achievement of students in the school. The work of the principal is complex and demanding. Our experiences (authors of this study) include serving as elementary school principals before moving into central office leadership positions designed to support principals and schools. Despite enjoying the work, we often felt isolated and overwhelmed by the intense responsibilities associated with the principalship. Our tenure in the position was sustained, in part, by collaboration and relationships with colleagues, more veteran principals, and central office leaders—all of which reduced our sense of professional isolation. In our current leadership positions of supporting principals, we often hear about feelings of professional isolation and how this phenomenon impacts principals' work. Therefore, we hoped that uncovering perceptions of school principals related to professional isolation would increase awareness for the need to provide collaborative support systems and resources for them. The recommendations related to two collaborative systems are intended for use by principals and central office leaders who support principals. These systems have the potential to reduce professional isolation and support principals with their complex, demanding work.

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Appendix A

From Isolation to Collaboration Survey

From Isolation to Collaboration Survey

Please answer the questions below. Your responses will be anonymous. The data collected from this survey are intended to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of school principals in Washington State related to professional isolation. All information will be reported in aggregate and will not be traceable to a specific respondent.

Multiple Choice: Please choose the answer which best describes you in your role as a school principal.

1. What gender do you identify with?

Mark only one oval.

- Female
 Male

2. What year were you born (e.g.: 1965, 1975, 1985, etc.)?

.....

3. To which racial or ethnic group do you most identify?

Mark only one oval.

- African American
 Asian/Pacific Islanders
 Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
 Latino or Hispanic
 Native American
 More than one race
 Other:

4. How many years have you been a school principal at your current school (e.g.: 1, 2, 3, etc.)?

.....

5. In total, how many years have you been employed as a school principal (e.g.: 1, 2, 3, etc.)?

.....

6. What level are you currently serving as a school principal?

Mark only one oval.

- Elementary School
- Middle School
- Junior High School
- High School
- Other: _____

7. How many years did you work in other certificated positions (teacher, counselor, etc.) prior to your current role as a school principal (e.g.: 1, 2, 3, etc.)?

8. Were you employed as an assistant principal or dean of students (or other similar positions e.g., administrative assistant) prior to obtaining a school principal position?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

9. What levels have you served as a school principal?

Check all that apply.

- Elementary School
- Middle School
- Junior High School
- High School
- Other

10. How would you describe your school district?

Mark only one oval.

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

11. What is the population of your school district?*Mark only one oval.*

- Less than 3,500 enrolled students
- 3,500-12,000 enrolled students
- 12,001-20,000 enrolled students
- Greater than 20,000 enrolled students

12. What is the population of your school?*Mark only one oval.*

- Less than 300 enrolled students
- 300 - 600 enrolled students
- 601 - 900 enrolled students
- Greater than 900 enrolled students

13. What is the percentage of free and reduced price meals at your school?

14. How often do you meet with other school principals in your district?*Mark only one oval.*

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Yearly

15. How often do you meet with other school administrators (special education director, assessment director, student learning director, etc.) in your district?*Mark only one oval.*

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Yearly

16. How often do you meet with school principals from other school districts?

Mark only one oval.

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Yearly

Please respond to the following questions as you would in your current position as school principal.

17. Please respond to the statements below using the following Likert scale: Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, or Very Frequently

Mark only one oval per row.

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
I participate in a professional learning community comprised of school principals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I engage in conversations with other school principals about feeling isolated.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel professionally isolated from other principals in my role as a school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel professionally isolated from other school administrators in my role as a school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel professionally isolated from central office leaders in my role as a school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have considered leaving my position as a school principal due to professional isolation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have considered leaving my position as a school principal due to the complex demands of the job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have considered leaving my position as a school principal due to lack of support.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. Please respond to the statements below using the following Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, or Strongly Agree.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
A principal colleague informally mentors me as a school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A principal colleague formally mentors me as a school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Central office leadership supports and guides my work as a school principal in my district.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My work performance is negatively impacted by professional isolation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My job satisfaction is negatively impacted by professional isolation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaboration with my principal colleagues would decrease my sense of professional isolation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaboration with my principal colleagues would positively impact my work performance.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My level of professional isolation would be decreased if I were formally mentored by another school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My work performance would be positively impacted if I were formally mentored by another school principal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. I access guidance and support from other school principals in my district.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

20. I access guidance and support from central office leadership in my district.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

21. I access guidance and support from a formal principal mentor in my district.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- If yes, who (e.g. another principal, central office leader, etc.)? _____

22. Which of the following positions currently exist at your school?

Check all that apply.

- Assistant principal
- Dean of students
- Athletic director
- Instructional coach
- Counselor
- Department head
- Teacher on special assignment
- Grade level teacher leader
- Office manager
- School psychologist
- School social worker
- Other: _____

23. Out of the following school staff members, who do you confide in about your professional responsibilities as a school principal?

Check all that apply.

- Assistant principal
- Dean of students
- Athletic director
- Instructional coach
- Counselor
- Department head
- Teacher on special assignment
- Grade level teacher leader
- Office manager
- School psychologist
- School social worker
- Other:

24. Which of the following challenges do you need support with as a school principal?

Check all that apply.

- Lack of fiscal resources
- Increasing student achievement
- School climate
- Demands or lack of time
- Lack of support from supervisors or central office
- Lack of support from colleagues
- Working with the teachers' union
- Professional isolation
- None of the above
- Other:

25. Which of these items do you identify as influencing professional isolation in your role as a school principal?

Check all that apply.

- Physical distance between me and my colleagues
- Constraints on time
- Lack of support from central office leaders
- Lack of support from other principal colleagues
- Lack of formal collaborative systems
- School or district climate
- I do not feel professionally isolated in my role as school principal
- Other:

26. What is the focus of your discussions with other school principals?

Check all that apply.

- Discussions focus on student growth
- Discussions focus on the improvement of instruction
- Discussions focus on student achievement
- Discussions focus on job demand
- Discussions focus on school climate
- Discussions focus on student management
- Discussions focus on student and staff safety
- Discussions focus on closing the achievement gap
- Discussions focus on culturally responsive school leadership and teaching
- Other:

27. Which district strategies or initiatives do you believe would reduce school principal isolation?

Check all that apply.

- Professional learning communities comprised of school principals
- Mentoring of school principals
- Central office support and conversations
- Principal team meetings
- Administrative walk throughs or learning walks with other school principals
- Other:

28. Would participation in professional learning communities comprised of school administrators (e.g.: principals, assistant principals, dean of students, administrative assistants, etc.) reduce your level of professional isolation? Yes or No? Please explain your answer.

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29. Would mentoring for your role as school principal reduce your level of professional isolation? Yes or No? Please explain your answer.

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Appendix B

Online Survey Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled: *From Isolation to Collaboration: School Principals*. Your participation in the study may help inform practitioners and central office leaders on perceptions of school principals related to professional isolation. The data will be used to inform recommendations for the design and implementation of two collaborative systems: principal professional learning communities and principal mentoring programs. Allison Drago and Vincent Pecchia, Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership candidates from the University of Washington Tacoma, are conducting this research study. You were selected to participate in this study because you currently serve as a school principal in Washington State.

The purpose of this research study is intended to explore the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of school principals in Washington State related to professional isolation. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online anonymous survey. Survey data will be collected and stored anonymously without an attached email or receipt. Your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You are free to skip any question that you choose by leaving the question blank and simply clicking on the next question. If you have questions about this research study, you may contact: Allison Drago at 253-279-9128 or Vincent Pecchia at 206-660-2591. Contact information for UW Human Subjects Division (206 543-0098, hsdinfo@uw.edu) for any complaints or concerns regarding subject rights.

The survey will take you approximately 15 minutes to complete and the survey window will close on December 31, 2015. By clicking "next" below you are indicating that you are a certified school principal employed in Washington State, have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study. If you wish not to participate in this study, press cancel. Please print a copy of this page for your records.

Next >>

Appendix C

PLC and Mentoring Recommendations

School Principal Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Recommendations

Definition:

A principal professional learning community (PLC) is an inquiry process of reflection whereby practitioners examine school-level data to set goals, identify what they must learn in order to improve student learning, learn together, create strategies for implementation, decide how they will be accountable and how the PLC will assess progress toward the goals, celebrate success, and reflect on practice (Hirsch & Hord, 2008). The overarching purpose of the PLC is increasing student achievement through increasing the knowledge and skills of the educators participating in the PLC.

Executive Summary:

The quality of principal leadership is positively correlated with student achievement. The school principal can have a profound effect on student achievement. “The principal remains the central source of leadership” in schools (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 4), yet, too often, school principals are left to lead schools in isolation and to seek guidance or mentorship on their own. Many school district lack support structures for principal to reduce or mitigate professional isolation. This proposal suggests implementing a Principal PLC structure would provide principals with needed support and professional development that may reduce their sense of isolation.

Boerema (2011) explored the challenges faced by new school principals and the supports they needed to be successful in their leadership role by interviewing school principals. He stated, “[loneliness] almost seems to be an epidemic to the office of school administrator, especially in small schools” (Boerema, 2011, p. 564). Lashway (2003) agreed that beginning principals experience isolation. “Unlike new teachers, who can usually find an empathetic colleague down the hall, principals literally have no peers in the building. These feelings of isolation can be magnified when they [principals] receive little feedback from supervisors” (p.2). One recommendation made by Doyle and Locke (2014) in their study on recruitment, placement, and retention of high quality school principals is to “make the job more manageable” (p. 35) by providing more support for them.

A suggested method to reduce isolation while building community expertise, collective learning, and individual learning is the establishment of PLCs amongst teachers in schools. Hirsch and Hord (2008) affirmed typical isolation of educators could be reduced through the PLC and collegiality grown within a school or district. Hirsch and Hord (2008) claimed that principals must have the opportunity to engage in PLCs outside of their building comprised of other school principals and administrators. These PLCs might consist of principals with similar school demographics, student achievement needs, common curricular materials, professional goals, or level of experience. The overarching purpose of the PLC is increasing student achievement through increasing the knowledge and skills of the educators participating in the PLC. A principal PLC is an inquiry process of reflection whereby practitioners examine school-level data to set goals, identify what they must learn in order to improve student learning, learn together, create strategies for implementation, decide how they will be accountable and how the PLC will assess progress toward the goals, celebrate success, and reflect on practice (Hirsch & Hord, 2008).

Using the PLC as an ongoing way for principals to work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry around a problem of practice for school principals or action research to achieve better results for the students in their school (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many, 2010) may be an effective way to support principals and reduce their isolation. The PLC model has been used as a vehicle for principal professional development throughout all levels of the P-12 systems because it allows principal-teams to learn together and then apply that learning at the school level. PLCs support principals in the complex work of increasing student achievement by establishing collective accountability and interdependence among the members of the learning community. Principal PLCs consist of discussing, analyzing, reconsidering, researching, implementing, monitoring, and sharing results.

Figure 1 illustrates the cycle of collective inquiry school principals may use to investigate shared, complex problems of practice.

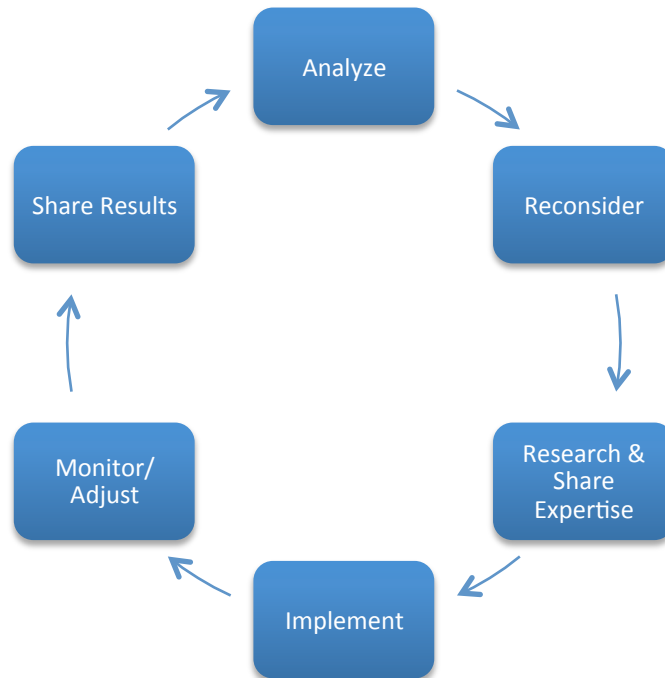


Figure 1. PLC Cycle of Inquiry for School Principals adapted by the University Place School District from *Improving Instruction Through Professional Learning Teams*, Northwest Regional Laboratory Center for School and District Improvement (n.d.)

Indicators of Need:

The role of the school principal is frequently referred to as the “loneliest position in K-12 education” (Maxwell, 2015, p. 2). Most principals enter the profession with experience as classroom teachers, a role for which typically there is significant support and collegial collaboration. The contrast between the roles of teacher and principal is stark. The principal is no longer one of many teachers in the school; rather he or she is alone without job-alike peers. Acceptance of the supervisory and evaluative responsibilities of the administrative role delineates a clear separation between teachers and principal. As a result, novice principals often experience such feelings as surprise, a sense of ultimate responsibility, stress, and loneliness (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Principals are not the only educators to feel isolated. A significant amount of literature exists concerning teacher isolation. To reduce isolation and autonomy among teachers, schools have introduced systems of collaboration, such as professional learning communities (PLCs) (DuFour, Eaker, & Eaker, 1998). Numerous authors have asserted a positive relation between teacher collaboration and student achievement (e.g., Fullan, 2001; DuFour et al., 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Both educational literature and current practice indicate better outcomes for student achievement when structures that foster collaboration are in place for teachers (Bauer & Brazer, 2013, Dufour et al., 2010; Hord, 2009; and Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). These collaborative structures are not as readily available for principals, and studies have identified elementary school principals as especially isolated from job-alike peers (Simieou, Decman, Grigsby, & Schumacher, 2010). Although research identifies the lack of structured support for principals when compared to that provided to address teacher isolation, much less literature explores the impact of principal professional isolation on work performance or advances solutions to remedy the phenomenon (Simieou et al., 2010).

Beyond the lack of collaborative structures, principal isolation exists in an environment of daily pressure to perform the complex, demanding, and stressful work of improving the achievement of all students (Fullan, 2002; Fullan, 2010; Hertling, 2001; Malone & Caddell, 2000). “Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to improvement in student achievement” (Fullan, 2002, p.16). Without the support and guidance of supervisors and colleagues, the principalship can be extremely demanding. Support structures, such as professional learning communities, mentoring, and central office support have the potential to enable principals’ work in this demanding, dynamic, and stressful profession. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify and understand the impacts of school principal professional isolation and explore ways to minimize this phenomenon.

In a study conducted by Drago and Pecchia (2016), an overwhelming 71% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that collaboration with their principal colleagues would decrease their sense of isolation. The importance of collaboration is supported in literature on school principals. Opportunities for guidance and support from other principals and administrators in the organization can take on various forms and structures. There were a total of 197 participants who responded to the first open-ended question focused on perceptions of school principals’ engagement in professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means to reduce professional isolation. In response to the dichotomous yes or no question, 155 respondents indicated that school principal engagement in PLCs would reduce professional isolation. One respondent shared, “Yes, it would reduce the feeling of being isolated. Having others to discuss and share ideas with would feel great.” Another school principal noted, “Participating in the county principal learning community has been a tremendous support. We meet six times during the school year and choose topics via email. While 6:30 a.m. is early, it is truly worth it!” Another mentioned that a PLC would reduce isolation “because it could give us [principals] an environment to talk about our work, not just a meeting to discuss agenda items.

Project Lead/Owner(s):

- Central Office Leadership
- PLC Leaders (Elementary, middle, high school)

Project Team Members:

- Central Office Leadership
- Building Principals

Resources:

- Sponsorship from central office leadership
- Stipends for PLC Leaders
- Scheduled time, preferably during the school day, or at an agreed upon time by school principals.
- Training and resources as needed. Training and resources may include literature, support and guidance with agenda setting, and access to data and analysis support.

Timeline and Summary of Planned Activities:

- PLC leaders will be chosen. It is recommended that there be at least one PLC leader representing each school type (elementary, middle, high school). PLC leaders will be trained in the PLC process and their responsibilities discussed. PLC leaders will also attend the training for all principals.
- PLC in large or small districts may consist of principals with similar school demographics, student achievement needs, common curricular materials, professional goals, or level of experience. The overarching purpose of the PLC is to increase student achievement through increasing the knowledge and skills of the educators participating in the PLC. The PLC meeting allows principals to share, collaborate, and support each other through “problems of practice.”
- PLC leaders should be successful school principals who help with agenda, calendar, sending reminders, and facilitating PLC meetings.
- Summer training will be provided for all school principals, their supervisors, and others participating in the principal PLC.
- Teaching and Learning will meet with PLC leaders to develop agenda based on the needs of principals and school and district data. The Teaching and Learning Department will help principals with data analysis as need.
- Principal PLCs will meet at least monthly (it is recommended that PLCs meet twice per month).
- Principal meetings utilize the cycle of inquiry (cited above).

Evaluation of Project Results:

- Data will be collected from school principals on their perceptions of the PLC structure and process as a form of support in a pre-survey (given at the start of the school year) and a post-survey (given at the end of the school year).
- School achievement data will be examined throughout the school year as part of the PLC cycle.
- Central office leadership who supervise school principals will evaluate the effectiveness of the PLC structure by examining evidence of principal performance.
- Central office leadership or human resources will monitor school principal retention data.

Others Who Need Communication:

- Superintendent and board of directors
- Teaching and Learning Department, including assessment coordinators to support with data analysis
- School principals’ union president (if applicable)
- Supervisors of school principals
- All school principals

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School Principal Mentoring Recommendations

Definition:

“Support from a more experienced colleague to help a beginner or someone new to a position or school system perform at a high level.” - Villani (2006)

Executive Summary:

A suggested method for reducing principals’ professional isolation is providing mentoring for them (Daresh, 2001; Villani, 2006; Weingartner, 2009). Because administrators work in isolation from peer principals, they have “different needs for ongoing support because they work away from their administrative colleagues” (Daresh, 2001, p. 26). Principal mentoring has been “gaining acceptance among states and urban districts since 2000” according to the Wallace Foundation (2007, p. 6), which asserted that investing in the growth and development of principals is wise. Cafferella and Daffron (2013) described mentoring as an intense, caring relationship in which someone with experience works with a less experienced person to promote both professional and personal growth. Mentors model expected behavior and values, provide support, and are willing to serve as a sounding board for the person being mentored (p.262).

Typically, mentors possess experience in the role and deep “craft knowledge” (Daresh, 2001, p. 3). Mentoring is most often used to provide support and guidance to a new school principal in his or her first year or two of service (School Leadership Network [SLN], 2014). This does not, however, imply that the mentor is only sharing ideas and strategies with the mentee. Effective mentors are responsible for listening and learning alongside the mentee (Daresh, 2001). Daresh (2001) suggested that effective mentors have the following desirable characteristics: They (a) are highly regarded by peers and supervisors as effective practicing principals, (b) demonstrate positive leadership characteristics, (c) ask frequent questions rather than just provide answers, (d) respect the views of others and alternate ways of doing the work, (e) desire to continue to grow beyond present performance, (f) model continuous learning, (g) exhibit political and social awareness. A strong, intentional “mentoring program is one of the best ways to ensure success” (Hall, 2008, p.449) of a new school principal.

Holloway (2004) stressed the importance of mentoring novice principals and identified the absence of structural mentorship programs in most school districts: “Mentoring programs can provide the collegial support that new principals need (p.87).” However, such programs are not available to most new principals. Fewer than half of the districts in Educational Research Service’s 2000 survey provided formal principal mentoring programs” (p.87). Daresh (2004) echoed Holloway’s assertion regarding the importance of mentorship: “Mentoring is an absolutely essential part of socialization and professional formation, whether at the pre-service, induction, or in-service phase of the professional development of school administrators” (p. 502). Novice principals may consult mentors periodically as to managerial duties such as master scheduling, supervision, and other daily administrative tasks. More importantly, a mentor can support novice principals by building upon their talents and inspiring a cycle of reflective practice by engaging in meaningful and constructive discourse (Daresh, 2004). The duties of school principal mentors may include advising, guiding, modeling, communicating, and developing the skills of new principals (Daresh, 2001). Some documented benefits of mentoring include “guidance and support during induction, increased self-confidence, encouragement to take risks to achieve goals, opportunities to discuss issues with a veteran, and promotes networking” (Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 6).

Although mentoring programs are most often provided for school principals early in their career, both novice and experienced principals may benefit from a mentor. There are two different forms of mentoring from which school principals may benefit. The first type is peer mentoring, where principals are mentored, trained, and provided support by a peer or fellow principal, either in the same school district or another school district. This peer-to-peer relationship can benefit the growth and development of the principal. The second type of mentoring is commonly referred to as central office mentoring, where a mentor who currently serves as a central office leader provides support to the principal. This central office leader ideally has experience as a successful principal and expertise as a school leader (Blazer, 2010).

Indicators of Need:

Fullan (2010) states that “the principal is second only to the teacher in his or her impact on the student” (p. 14), but recruiting and retaining exceptional educators to serve as principals is becoming more difficult for school districts (Malone & Caddell, 2000). The average tenure of an elementary school principal is 4.9 years, a middle school principal is 4.48 years, and high school principal is only 3.3 years (Viadero, 2009). A University of Washington report noted that nationally approximately two out of 10 school principals leave their positions each year (Campbell, DeArmond, & Denice, 2014). In 2013, the turnover rate of school principals in Washington State was 15%, which is slightly lower than the national average. According to a National Association of Elementary Principals study, principals left the profession because of workload, personal costs (demands on time, family, and personal health), restrictive policies and procedures, and “profound isolation on the job” (School Leadership Network [SLN], 2014, p. 12). “I’m really worried about the crisis. If we continue to burn out these people, we are not going to find leaders” (Glen “Max” McGee, Illinois School Superintendent, from Lovely (2004, p. 1). According to Copeland (2001), “We have reached the point where aggregate expectations for the principalship are so exorbitant, they exceed the limits of what reasonably might be expected from one person” (p. 529). Principals are expected to be “a manager, instructional leader, motivator, lay psychologist, and public relations expert” (Malone & Caddell, 2000, p. 162).

In a study conducted by Drago and Pecchia (2016), 198 school principals responded to an open-ended survey question that focused on perceptions of school principal mentoring as a means to reduce professional isolation. Themes and patterns that emerged from the data included a dichotomous response of yes or no with some participants indicating that school principal mentoring may reduce professional isolation. Specifically, 102 respondents indicated that school principal mentoring would reduce professional isolation. Out of these “yes” responses, 23 respondents indicated that school principal mentoring should be focused on new principals or principals new to a district as a means of reducing professional isolation. One respondent stated that “principals in the first few years should have a mentor and principals with more experience should either be a mentor or operate in a professional community to foster professional belonging.” Seven respondents reported that school principal mentoring by the central or district office would reduce professional isolation. A respondent shared that they “have support from the district office and they have a better understanding of the unique qualities of my school.”

There were 71 respondents who conveyed that school principal mentoring would not reduce professional isolation and 25 respondents who reported “maybe” or depends.” Out of the 71 respondents who stated that school principal mentoring would not reduce professional isolation, 24 of them shared that they were experienced principals and did not need a mentor. One respondent stressed that they have been doing the job of school principal “long enough to get answers to questions that are new.” Another respondent reported that school principal mentoring would not benefit them because they are “late in their career”; however, “yes for newer principals in their first 3–5 years” of the principalship. Of the respondents who reported “maybe” or “depends,” a common concern that was expressed centered on the qualifications of the mentors, such as skills, knowledge, and background (i.e., previous work experience as a school principal), as well as, the overall structure of the mentorship program (i.e., time constraints, meeting locations, etc.). In addition, a cross tabulation analysis was conducted to determine whether school principals’ years of work experience was correlated with perceptions of formal mentoring and decreased professional isolation in the school principalship. The proportion of respondents with 0–3 and 4–9 years of work experience who strongly agree or agree that formal mentoring would decrease professional isolation was 43% as compared to respondents with more than 10 years of experience at 23%.

<p>Project Lead/Owner(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Office Leadership • Mentor School Principals 	<p>Project Team Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Office Leadership • Mentors (Veteran school principals with four or more years of principal experience) <p>Mentees (Novice school principals with 0–3 years of principal experience and/or a principal with 4–9 years of experience in the principalship needing ongoing mentoring support)</p>
<p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsorship from central office leadership • Stipends for school principals who serve as a mentors to novice school principals • Scheduled time, preferably during the school day, for mentors to meet with mentees and central office leadership 	
<p>Timeline and Summary of Planned Activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In July of each new school year, central office leadership (preferably those that supervise principals) assign mentors (veteran school principals) to mentees (novice school principals) • Mentors and mentees meet at least once a month throughout the school year for a formalized meeting (this meeting will take place at the mentees school or sometimes off site). • Mentors are available by cell and/or email throughout the school year • Mentors "cc" mentees on school communication throughout the school year that pertains to comprehensive school improvement planning, school culture, etc. • Mentors keep mentees informed of important dates and timelines (collective bargaining agreements, staffing, evaluation process, etc.) • Mentors and mentees meet with central office leadership once a trimester 	
<p>Evaluation of Project Results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central office leadership who supervise school principals will collect qualitative data throughout the school year from mentors and mentees regarding their experiences of participating in the mentorship program. • Central office leadership who supervise school principals will evaluate the effectiveness of the mentorship program by examining evidence of novice school principals' evaluation (criterion evidence and student growth goal data) • Central office leadership will monitor school principal retention data 	
<p>Others Who Need Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent and board of directors • School principals' union president • All school principals 	
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