

Visible at Night: The Growing Expectations of U.S. Public School Principals

David B. Reid
Seton Hall University

Benjamin M. Creed
Northern Illinois University

Abstract

Since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and more recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the expectations of school principals have greatly expanded as they are often considered the primary drivers of school reform efforts (Murphy et al., 2013; West et al., 2010). While expectations are undoubtedly growing for principals during traditional school hours (which we define as one hour before teacher contract time begins until one hour after teacher contract time ends), expectations are also growing for principals outside of traditional school hours. In this study, we investigate the types of school-related activities in which principals engage outside of traditional school hours. Specifically we ask: (1) What are the national trends over the past 12 years in the hours worked by principals?; (2) How do principals spend their time on school-related activities outside of traditional school hours?; and (3) In what ways do these trends influence principal job satisfaction, including decisions to stay or leave their school? Results of our quantitative and qualitative analysis suggest principals spend a significant amount of their time on various school-related tasks outside of traditional school hours. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Introduction

Since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and more recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the expectations of school principals have greatly expanded as they are often considered the primary drivers of school reform efforts (Murphy et al., 2013; West et al., 2010). While expectations are undoubtedly growing for principals during traditional school hours (which we define as one hour before teacher contract time begins until one hour after teacher contract time ends), expectations are also growing for principals outside of traditional school hours. For example, most principals are expected/required to attend school and community events and extracurricular activities before or after traditional school hours. Additionally, traditional principal job responsibilities, such as evaluating teacher performance, is now more time consuming than in previous years (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2013), pushing tasks principals used to complete during the school day to outside of traditional school hours. Although there is a wide range of evidence documenting how principals spend their time during traditional school hours (Goldring et al., 2008; Grissom et al., 2015; Hochbein et al., 2018; Hrong et al., 2009; Martin et al., 1981; Sebastian et al., 2018), less research examines how principals spend their time engaging in school-related activities outside of traditional school hours.

How principals negotiate responsibilities outside of traditional school hours has the potential to impact their more traditionally thought of responsibilities, such as increasing teacher effectiveness and supporting student learning. Additionally, principal turnover, specifically “burnout”, is a concern for many schools, particularly schools with limited resources and in hard-to-staff districts (Branch et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2008; Ladd, 1999). Frequent turnover of principals is detrimental to the stability of schools and the long-term success of schools, teachers, and students (Fuller et al., 2008). Imposing additional expectations on principals, particularly

outside of the school day, has the potential to increase turnover and burnout amongst principals and lead to other negative effects, such as a lack of qualified and willing candidates to become school principals (particularly in hard-to-staff schools/districts).

In this study, we investigate the types of school-related activities in which principals engage outside of traditional school hours. Specifically we ask: (1) What are the national trends over the past 12 years in the hours worked by principals?; (2) How do principals spend their time on school-related activities outside of traditional school hours?; and (3) In what ways do these trends influence principal job satisfaction, including decisions to stay or leave their school? To investigate this phenomenon we use a mixed-methods approach. We use data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) to examine trends over 12 years in the number of hours worked by principals and how principals report allocating their time to varying tasks. Leveraging the associated Principal Follow-up Surveys, we also examine how growing work hours influences principals' decisions to remain in their building and/or the profession (stay, leave, or switch). To understand the patterns in our secondary data analysis, we interviewed 10 public school principals three times each (a total 30 interviews) during the 2018-2019 school year, in an attempt to better understand the types of school-related activities in which principals engaged outside of traditional school hours as well as to examine how, if at all, non-traditional hour job expectations influence principal decisions to remain in their current school, change schools, or exit the profession.

Relevant Literature

School principals are fundamentally important to school improvement efforts (Copland, 2001; Peck et al., 2013; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Because of this acknowledged importance, researchers have extensively studied the work of school principals, finding the work of principals to be complex and time consuming (Wolcott, 1973). For example, principals are expected to

perform job duties such as overseeing personnel, acting as a mediator between teachers, students, parents, and the community, and managing the logistics of running a complex organization (Grissom et al., 2015; Kafka, 2009; Spillane et al., 2007). Although principals have always engaged in numerous complex and time consuming work-related activities, since the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and more recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the job responsibilities and expectations of principals have greatly expanded as principals are often looked at as the primary driver of school reform and policy implementation efforts (Murphy et al., 2013; West et al., 2010). For example, principals spend an increased amount of their day evaluating teacher performance (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2013) due to changes to teacher evaluation policies.

Given all that is expected of school principals it is not surprising the amount of time principals spend working has increased in recent years (NCES, 2018). According to the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) principal's report working on average about 60 hours per week (Lavigne et al., 2016). Nationally, the average U.S. school day is approximately six and two-thirds hours long (NCES, 2018). Even if we assume principals arrive one hour before the school day begins and remain one hour after school ends that only accounts for a little more than 43 total work hours per week.

There is a well-documented (and growing) body of literature that suggests the primary activities in which principals engage during these 43 “traditional” hours. For example, principals complete paperwork and other administrative tasks (Grissom et al., 2015; Lavigne et al., 2016), engage in instructional tasks/activities, such as observing teacher instruction and leading teacher meetings (Grissom et al., 2015; Lavigne et al., 2016), and interact with students, parents, and

teachers (Grissom et al., 2015; Lavigne et al., 2016). However, little research examines the work-related activities in which principals engage outside of traditional school hours.

Through this research, we are interested in examining the activities in which principals engage during the approximately 17 they report working outside of traditional school hours. This paper extends the current literature on principal time use and job expectations by examining principal activities and responsibilities outside of traditionally thought of school hours.

Specifically, this research makes a contribution to the literature by examining the ways in which cumulative job responsibilities and expectations influence principals' abilities to perform in-school tasks, as well as how these expectations influence areas such as principal turnover and burnout.

Research Methods

In this project, we used an across-stage, mixed-methods study design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) to investigate how the growing number of hours principal's report working outside of traditional school hours impacts their perceptions of their work and, ultimately, their decision to remain in the profession. We drew on data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) to examine trends over the past 12 years in the number of hours worked by principals and how principals allocated that time to varying tasks. We used the Principal Follow-up Surveys to examine how overall hours worked and allocation of time relate to their decision to stay, leave their school, or leave the profession. We further investigated patterns found in the quantitative data through interviewing 10 public school principals three times each for a total of 30 interviews.

SASS, NTPS, and Principal-Follow-up Survey Data

We link three waves of SASS data (2003-04; 2007-08; 2011-12) with the first wave of NTPS data (2015-16) to create a rich, longitudinal data set to explore the trends in number of hours worked by principals. By also including the corresponding Principal Follow-up Survey data for each available wave (currently SASS 2007-08 and 2011-12)), we can include principal decisions to stay, switch, or leave in the subsequent year. These nationally representative public school surveys allow for the examination of patterns in the hours principals work, what they work on, and how these relate to turnover decisions. Further, we will explore whether patterns differ by context, student demographics, or principal demographics.

Interview Participants

We generated a list of potential participants (all participant names are pseudonyms) based on two criteria. First, all principals in our sample were required to work at a traditional public school. Second, all principals in our sample were required to have five years of experience as a school principal. As many of our interviews questions asked about how the role of principal has evolved in recent years, we felt it was important for all of our participants to have some historical context of the position, as well as be able to compare their work experiences over the years. Although this purposeful sampling scheme was not able to capture all important variables that may influence our findings, the design was useful to provide insights of the different perspectives offered by these principals (Patton, 2014). Additionally, the goal of this type of sampling is not to make generalizable statements about all principals (or even those with similar characteristics), but instead to begin hypothesis and theory building about the types of activities in which principals engage outside of traditional school hours, as well as how these expectations may influence principal job satisfaction.

We interview 10 public school principals three times each during the 2018-19 school year (for a total of 30 interviews - see Table 1 for complete participant information). Each principal was interview at the beginning of the school year, once near the middle of the school year, and again near the end of the school year. The purpose of interviewing principals multiple times throughout the school year was to account for the limitations of self-reporting. Interviewing principals throughout the school year allowed us to have more confidence in principals’ responses about the types of activities in which they engaged and how this engagement influenced their daily work as a principal. We conducted all interviews in a one-on-one setting. We audio recorded all interviews.

Table 1.

Principal Background

Principal	Elem, Middle, High School	Rural, Urban, Sub	Years as Principal
Dr. Youngs	Middle	Urban	30
Mr. Harris	High	Suburban	6
Ms. Rodriguez	Middle	Urban	10
Mr. Henderson	Elem	Suburban	5
Mr. Towers	Middle	Suburban	6
Ms. Yates	Elem	Suburban	6
Mr. James	Middle	Suburban	8
Dr. Jenkins	Elem	Urban	5
Dr. Imes	Elem	Suburban	10
Ms. Almond	Elem	Suburban	10

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. The goals of our quantitative analysis were to 1) describe the trends in hours worked by principals overall and on particular tasks, 2) examine how these trends vary by context, and 3) identify initial patterns between hours worked and decisions to stay, switch, or leave, we focus on developing a careful descriptive analysis. We first describe national trends in the number of hours worked and on what tasks. Then we conduct a series of mean

comparisons to test for differences across subgroupings (e.g., enrollment size, student demographics, urbanicity, grade level). We then utilize pooled OLS, with state fixed effects, to identify patterns between principal decisions to stay, switch, or leave and both the overall hours worked and time on tasks.

Qualitative analysis. The research team analyzed all interview data using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. We looked for patterns, trends, commonalities, and links among the participants (Miles et al., 2014) and developed codes inductively. As themes emerged through the coding process, we grouped them together by theme (Miles et al., 2014). As we reviewed our coding, we also identified common excerpts that highlighted similar themes and ideas. To ensure the validity of the data collected, we re-coded our data a second time. We noted any discrepancies in order to refine and justify assertions and to look for possible alternative interpretations of the data (Miles et al., 2014).

Preliminary Findings

In this study we asked: (1) What are the national trends over the past 12 years in the hours worked by principals?; (2) How do principals spend their time on school-related activities outside of traditional school hours?; and (3) In what ways do these trends influence principal job satisfaction, including decisions to stay or leave their school?

RQ1: National Trends

Note: These data are currently embargoed. We will provide the data during our presentation.

RQ2: Non-traditional School Hours/Activities

The principals in this study report spending time on school-related activities before and after traditional school hours, as well on as during weekend hours. The activities in which these

principals engage vary from completing administrative paperwork to attending extracurricular school activities. Our analysis reveal three prominent themes: (1) principals spend time before and after school and on weekends completing work they did not have time to complete during traditional school hours; (2) principals spend time being visible at school and community events; and (3) principals spend time being virtually visible, via email and various social media platforms. Although these findings are consistent amongst elementary, middle, and high school principals, the one high school principal reported working the most hours outside of traditional school hours. Additionally, the middle school principals in our sample reported dedicating more time to work related tasks outside of traditional school hours than their elementary school principal peers.

Completing work. The first finding that emerged after an analysis of our interview data is principals spend a significant amount of time outside of traditional school hours completing school-related work. The principals in this study have various reasons for doing this, including a lack of time to complete this work during the traditional day and not wanting to sacrifice time in teacher classrooms completing paperwork in their office. For example, Dr. Youngs explained he strongly believed he needed to be present during the school day in teachers' classrooms and in the hallways. As a result, he completed any paperwork, such as his observations of teachers' instruction, on the weekend. He said,

I'll tell you what I do is I observe all the people out there during the week. I am always observing, but I don't write them (the observations) up until Saturday morning. I keep all my notes and then I'll write up all my observations on Saturday and put them into the system then. I used to take great pride in observing somebody one day and giving them the feedback the next day. But now with all

the observations that are required, it's not realistic to write up and do all the stuff you need to do for the observations overnight. Now, I just keep it all in a notebook and I take the notebook home on Saturday.

Physically visible. The second finding that emerged after an analysis of our interview data is principals spend a significant amount of time outside of traditional school hours being physically visible, including attending extracurricular school events, parent/student meetings, and district/community events. For example, Mr. James said,

We have events, maybe not as much as our high school, but we have a lot of things that we do on a day-to-day basis and people want to see you there. The students appreciate seeing you at their events, whether it is that a soccer game or concert. The parents appreciate you seeing you there too. It is about making efforts to be visible. It's all about talking to people. It's about engaging with people and listening to people and that's for teachers, parents, and students.

Ms. Rodriguez described the importance of making sure she (and other members of her staff) to made efforts to be available for parents at times that convenient for working parents/guardians. She said,

We always speak about parent involvement. How do we get the parents involved? Bringing them to the table, making them part of the process and we have to look at how do we make it convenient. and therefore for a principal, our day isn't from 8 to 3. Otherwise, we are aren't making it convenient for anybody.

Virtually visible. Another finding that emerged after an analysis of these data is principals feel a need to be virtually visible before and after school hours, as well as during the weekends. The principals in this study report a variety of reasons for this feeling, including

meeting the expectations of parents/guardians requests for immediate responses and feedback to questions and concerns, promoting the various activities occurring at their school, and monitoring school-related social media sites. Mr. James said,

I'm checking emails all hours of the night. (I) check them before I go to bed. It's not like I leave here after school is over and then shut it off. I take pride in that I'm available and I will get back to you and your emails and calls will not just be ignored.

Mr. Towers said,

We have a Facebook page and Twitter account. I have help, but I post a lot of stuff on their myself and our parents are very active on those accounts. It's all about promoting the school and everything that the teachers and students are doing.

RQ3: Principal Job Satisfaction

Our final research question asked how, if at all, principal work expectations and job requirements outside of traditional school hours influenced their future employment decisions. An analysis of our interview data suggest principal time use trends influence principal job satisfaction, including decisions to stay or leave their school. For example, Mr. Harris said,

It's tough because there's lots and lots going on. This is my 6th year here and I was at the middle school for 2.5 years and another place for 1.5. So, it's almost 10 years...you do burn yourself out. I can't foresee myself being here for much longer. I need that (the feeling of working hard), otherwise you get complacent. Complacency is a killer. And when you're complacent you aren't motivated to continue to produce different and new ideas. But working hard for the school

leads to burnout. It's a catch 22. The harder your work, the more challenging it is to sustain that pace.

Ms. Rodriguez said,

I mean there is reason principals don't last, especially in urban contexts. It's hard work. And it's not just hard work, but it's hard work with limited resources. You have to work harder and you feel like it's your responsibility to make sure your teachers and students are taken care of - often at your own expense. It's not sustainable. Maybe for some people, but not for me.

Discussion

Our study reviews the most recent trends in hours worked by traditional school principals, specifically focusing on how principals allocate their time to work-related tasks outside of traditional school hours. Our analysis shows, (*data currently embargoed*).

Additionally, an analysis of our interview data reveal principals spend time before and after school and on weekends completing work they did not have time to complete during traditional school hours; principals spend time being visible at school and community events; and principals spend time being virtually visible, via email and various social media platforms. According to the principals in our study, increasing time spent on these tasks is leading them to think about leaving their role as a school leader.

Our analysis suggests that the total amount of time principals work has increased in recent years. There are many potential reasons principals are spending more time on the job, including increased accountability measures/pressures imposed by local, state, and federal agencies or a principal's personal feeling of accountability for school performance, a feeling of obligation to the students, school, and community. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners

are aware of these growing expectations and have advocated for principals to engage in distributed leadership, calling on the expertise of their network of colleagues, teachers, students, and communities. However, even though a distributed leadership approach is a common characteristic amongst successful school leaders (Spillane et al., 2007), principals have an immense feeling of “ultimate responsibility” for everything from the academic performance of their school to the safety and well-being of their staff and students (Peck et al., 2013), which may be one reason principals report working more hours year after year.

Implications and Conclusion

Our study has several implications. First, for policy, policymakers should consider the consequences of adding/reforming policies that will likely influence the daily work of school principals without also considering additional funding, resources or support for this school leaders. School leaders have longed commented on the idea of the “unfunded mandate” and increasing what is expected of school principals (e.g. a more intensive and time consuming teacher evaluation process) without adequate supports has the potential to add to burnout and turnover of principals, who try to address these growing expectations with fidelity, but often times can only do so for a finite period of time. Additionally, adding to the more traditionally thought of responsibilities of principals, such as observing teacher instruction and leading staff meetings, is pushing other traditional principal responsibilities outside of traditional work hours (e.g. completing paperwork on the weekends). Put differently, principals often not only feel increased pressure to respond completely to policy initiatives, but often times change their beliefs and practices to respond to these pressures (Shipps & White, 2009). This is potential worrisome in that principals become more concerned with compliance than leading a community of learners.

For practitioners, although some researchers have warned not to expect too much from one individual when considering how to best improve educational organizations (Copland, 2001), in recent years, schools, districts, and states have arguably went the other way, prioritizing placing one “super-principal” in schools as the primary means for school improvement (Peck et al., 2013; Schroeder, 1977). Because of this, states and school districts should consider updating the training and support they provide to their school leaders. In recent decades, states and school districts have spent large amounts of money intended to train and develop school leaders for specific roles and responsibilities during the school day (West et al., 2010), yet principals are spending much of their time and energy on activities outside of these traditional job requirements. States and school districts need to realign this support and training to meet the current needs of principals outside of traditional school hours. For example, principals may benefit from social media trainings, from how to effectively market their school to how to best navigate challenging situations around cyber-bullying and dissatisfied parents/guardians. As society continues to evolve and parents, guardians and students expect more visibility from school leaders, as well as immediate feedback/responses to questions and concerns, states and schools should train principals in how to successfully and reasonably be accessible to the individuals whom they serve.

Finally, for researchers, while the amount of research examining how principals spend their time has proliferated in recent years (Grissom et al., 2015; Peck et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018), this work often solely focuses on Monday through Friday and typically is limited to work during the traditional school day. Based on our analysis of both our qualitative and quantitative data, principals are spending significant amounts of their job working outside of traditional school hours, including nights and weekends. Therefore, future research should

examine not only how often and what types of activities in which principals engage during these work hours, but how these added work expectations influence crucial areas such as burnout and turnover, pursuit of the principalship, and the ability for principals to be quality leaders during the traditional school day. In the same vein, future research could explore how specific principal characteristics influence the findings to this study's research questions. For example, do more experienced principals navigate non-traditional work time differently than their less experience peers? Do novice principals feel more compelled than their veteran peers to work longer hours? Providing nuanced research of the characteristics of principals and their work habits has the potential to provide evidence of how to best support all types of principals as they navigate this increasingly complex and time consuming job.

This study highlights how the growing expectations of school leaders influence principals' ability to respond to their more traditionally thought of daily work. Additionally, these findings suggest growing expectations of principals influence their respective decisions to stay, move, or leave the profession. Offering this inside perspective provides an opportunity for policymakers, practitioners, and leadership preparation programs to use empirical evidence to support the cognitively and physically demanding work of being a school principal.

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