Uncovering the Challenges and Leadership Practices of Virtual School Principals

David C. Gustafson
Desert Sands Unified School District
david.gustafson@desertsands.us

MD Haque
University of La Verne
mhaque@laverne.edu

Abstract

Virtual schools are one of the fastest growing educational options for students in the United States. In spite of the increase in virtual program options and enrollment, limited research has been conducted on how virtual school principals lead their organizations. This qualitative case study explores the challenges facing virtual school principals and how these leaders navigate these challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 20 public, private, and charter virtual school principals from across California. The findings from this study identified the essential skills and ways in which virtual principals overcome leadership challenges. These factors included: Being open to new ideas, taking positive risks, staying flexible, empowering staff, communicating effectively, and serving stakeholders. The findings from this study can offer insight to many traditional brick and mortar school leadership that are holding fully online classes due to COVID-19.

Introduction

The rise of K-12 virtual schools over the past 20 years is a well-documented phenomenon in the American educational system. According to a virtual school report published by the National Education Policy Center (2019), University of Colorado Boulder, there were 501 full-time virtual schools enrolled 297,712 students in the United States in 2017-18. The report also indicates that thirty-three states have full time virtual schools, and sixteen states have blended schools. The number of K-12 students enrolling in full-time virtual and blended learning schools continues to grow, despite research suggesting concerns about their rigor and effectiveness (Quilici & Joki, 2012). According to Barbour and Mulcahy (2008) and Barbour (2013), proponents of virtual schools contended that certain benefits (i.e. lower cost of operation and opportunity for personalized learning) to online learning programs outweigh concerns about pedagogical value. Moreover, many virtual schools have demonstrated increased graduation rates among targeted student groups, including students with disabilities (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010).

The leaders of virtual schools play a crucial role of facilitating a frequently changing style of education, while leading their organizations through unique administrative tasks and priorities (Bennett & Bennett, 2019). As a result, virtual school leaders face unique challenges compared to those experienced by the leaders at traditional brick and mortar schools (Richardson, LaFrance & Beck, 2015). While there is a growing body of research around valuable studies on best practices and pedagogical issues related to K-12 online learning, few studies focused on the effective leadership practices in virtual schools (Bennett & Bennett, 2019; McLeod and Richardson 2011; Quilici & Joki, 2012). In response to this gap in the leadership literature, the purpose of this study is to understand how virtual school principals think about and describe challenges to their emerging

and contextually responsive leadership practices. A better understanding of the leadership challenges faced by the virtual school principals and how they respond to them will add to the body of knowledge about virtual school education and effective school leadership. We addressed two main research questions.

1. What are the contemporary leadership challenges for principals in virtual school?
2. How do virtual school principals responding to the challenges?

Literature Review

The school principal is heralded as one of the most important drivers of school improvement. Research suggests that the principal is they key decision maker, problem solver, and change agent at the school level (Sanders, 2014). Among the important tasks associated with effective principals is the development of school environments that support continuous improvement. This entails working with teachers to broaden and deepen their professional skills, managing resources efficiently, and garnering external supports and materials that promote powerful teaching and learning (Davis et al. 2005; Elmore 2000; Richardson 1987). When these actions are linked to district reform efforts, principals help to create more innovative and effective educational environments. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) state that principal leadership comprises three broad categories: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting school climate. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) suggested four practices of an effective principal, they are:1) provide direction, 2) develop people, 3) re-design the organization, and 4) manage the instructional programs. According to Dinham (2004), there can be little doubt that leadership is important in developing effective, innovative schools and in facilitating quality teaching and learning. The author further adds that principals can play key roles in providing the conditions where teachers can operate effectively and students can learn.

Given the perceived importance of leadership, it is no wonder that an effective principal is thought to be a necessary precondition for an effective school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). However, the idea of school leadership is far from being simple; it is complex, changing, and demanding in the 21st century more than what it used to be (Fullan, 2011). According to Bennett and Bennett III (2019), the virtual school setting is unique in many ways, which creates its own challenges to the effectiveness of leadership approaches. According to Yukl and Mahsud (2010), leadership in virtual schools require a highly adaptive and flexible approach. While common challenges exist between their brick-and-mortar counterparts, some challenges are unique to the virtual school leadership. Despite profound changes involving online and blended learning, little research, guidance, or support for virtual school leadership exists (Davis, 2011; McLeod & Richardson, 2011). Richardson et al. (2015) uncovered six specific challenges facing 18 virtual school leaders from across the United States. The areas they identified were funding, staffing, accountability, time, parent/family involvement, and professional development. In addition, Toppin and Toppin (2016) identified a few challenges facing the virtual school leaders. Among them are lack of best practices data due to limited research in the area, aligning learner needs, pedagogy and technology, accountability and oversight, and support and services to the students. Student completion rate presents another challenge for virtual schools as there is no consistent practice for monitoring students for course completion (Barth et al., 2012). Communication was mentioned as one of the largest challenges impacting virtual school leaders, as it relates to communicating with teachers and other stakeholder groups (Quilici & Joki, 2012). The absence of reliable systemic methods of evaluating the effectiveness of a virtual school poses another challenge to the virtual school principals (Ferdig, Cavanaugh, DiPietro, Black, & Dawson, 2009). The challenges of virtual schools also extend to issues related to hiring, training, and supporting online teachers (Barbour & Reeves, 2009), as an effective teacher in the in-person environment does not mean that they can transfer that effectiveness to the online environment. It is also challenging for virtual school leaders

that all virtual school teachers receive substantial professional development in areas of expressed and manifested need (Evans, 1989). Additionally, virtual school leadership certification is also lacking, and changes to virtual leadership preparation programs have been minimal. According to LaFrance and Beck (2014), one key missing component of preservice administrative programs is a lack of exposure to online learning environments.

Leithwood (2005) in his synthesis of previous studies reported that factors that posit challenges to the virtual school leaders are both internal to leaders, as well as features of their external environment, and are critical to address to give rise to successful school leadership.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we used a qualitative design. Our rationale for choosing a qualitative approach was twofold. First, qualitative research methods allow us to explore the research questions from the perspective of the participants rather than the researcher (Maitlis 2005). This seemed especially relevant as the lack of research on effective leadership practices in virtual K-12 schools. Second, qualitative methods are especially suited to answer open-ended and specifically 'how' questions (Gray et al. 2012). Thus, a qualitative approach allowed us to systematically capture virtual school leader's perspective of the challenges they experience and how they address them.

We conducted 20 qualitative interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol with virtual school principals from across California. We interviewed respondents from different types of schools in order to gain a general understanding of leadership practices independent of a specific organization or type. Nine of the participants led schools in a public-school district, three led a charter school, and eight led a private/independent school. All of the schools represented in this study offered full-time enrollment options to students, though some of the schools also offered part-time/supplemental enrollment opportunities. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Five broad questions were used to guide the interviews. Questions include the following: What are some of the most prevalent challenges you face as a virtual school leader? How do you, as a leader, overcome these challenges?

Overall enrollments for the schools ranged from 55 students to approximately 6,300. To be included in the study, participants had to have served in the capacity of a principal for at least three years and, at the time of this study, had to be assigned in their district as the principal of a virtual school. In addition, all participants were from an accredited, state-recognized virtual school that served students in Grades 6 through 12 or K through 12.

Analysis began with a review of the interview transcription by listening to the audio recordings and checking the accuracy of the transcribed text. The next stage of analysis involved the search for patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Each interview was compared to every interview to ensure that the data was examined in many divergent ways. From this comparison of cases several themes and patterns emerged. These patterns and themes were coded to summarize the data into a smaller number of overarching themes or constructs (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We aimed to improve the reliability and validity of our research by having both researchers independently review the analysis as a triangulation technique.

Findings

The study findings revealed five prevalent themes and sub-themes and are presented in Table 1. The areas of challenge were time, parental/family involvement, professional development, managing student social-emotional wellness, and policy.

Table 1 Research themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Time	• Time management • Stakeholder communication • Personal challenges
2. Parent/family involvement	• Lack of involvement • Over involvement • Powerful partnerships
3. Professional development	• Potential of professional development • Quality of offerings
4. Social-emotional well-being	• Increased need • Supports available for students
5. Policy	• Managing multiple programs/sites • Insuring quality while expectations continuously change
6. Other challenges	• Curriculum quality • Marketing of program • Academic dishonesty/cheating

Time

Findings from the observation data reveal that time is the most significant challenge for virtual school leaders. One participant remarked, "Yes it's a challenge. I mean, just the same way that it would be for anybody else. But since I've been on this call with you, I have received 76 emails." Other participants echoed the sentiment that much of their time is spent reading and responding from emails from students, families, staff, and other stakeholders. Another participant expressed that when "something doesn't happen that needed to, I feel really bad. With such little time available in my schedule, it's just hard to prioritize sometimes." Participants also expressed that with juggling so many responsibilities and working long hours, it meant less time with their own families.

Parental/Family Involvement
When discussing the challenges of parental/family involvement, some of the participants identified apparent lack of parental/family participation as a significant issue for them; however, other participants indicated that many families were "over involved."

Participant A shared,
We serve a wide range of students—from Advanced Placement to socially awkward to students with Asperger's. Parents come to us with so many different kinds of requests. Whatever the kid's needs are, we are here and try to serve them all - But there are challenges with that.

Other participants indicated one of the challenges with parent/family involvement is the misconception of virtual education.

One participant explained,
A lot of our students' families, I'll be honest with you, are looking for something different than a comprehensive site. Parents tend to sometimes think it's easier over here. So there's a little bit of

misconception with that. In reality, they just want something different for their kid.

Another participant shared, "Some parents come to us thinking that this place [virtual school] is going to solve it all. My student is good at video games, so they must be a good online learner."

Participants did share that involvement from home can lead to success in a virtual environment. Finding innovative ways to involve is difficult, but a worthwhile challenge: "The amount of parents that are actually involved at this particular school is pretty limited, but the ones that are involved, they've been a great resource. I definitely see that end, where the parents are very, very appreciative of us. They see that the attention and the relationships that are being built with the teachers and the students together."

Professional Development

Although some of the participants in the study indicated that professional development could actually be easier in a virtual school, many indicated that professional development on best practices in online teaching was actually very limited and, thus, a challenge for them. Many participants referenced local, regional, state, and international organizations that hosted conferences and other opportunities for professional development. A participant indicated, Here's a weakness that we see, we're going to give you some training and it's from a guy in Kansas." They absolutely love it. It connects them with others outside of our district and the county." Additional support identified by participants included local school district-led professional development as well as conferences sponsored by professional organizations. Regardless of the medium, one participant shared that, "the most effective professional development comes from purposefully planned and regularly scheduled opportunities to meet, collaborate, and grow as a team."

Social-Emotional Well-Being

When asked what other challenges virtual school principals face, participants in this study identified their supporting their students' social-emotional well-being as a new challenge. Participants shared that so many of the students have, "emotional baggage." One participant explained, "These kids are truly suffering from things like social anxiety and other health issues. But they find opportunity here with us." Another participant shared, "There's a lot of anxiety out there, a lot of concerns. The need to support a student (and their social-emotional wellness) is a lot more obvious than I have seen in the past." According to another participant, "The students that we serve are the kids that suffer from issues outside of academic learning. They're a victim of trauma or bullying… It's way different today than it was only a few years ago."

Policy

Finally, participants shared that their assigned duties went beyond leading a virtual school and extended into the supervision of other district programs. Navigating the policies of each of these programs, specifically unique to virtual education, was identified by several participants as a source of frustration. One participant explained, "I feel like I'm really kind of stretched thin. I'm working so hard to try and build an amazing online program for the district, but I'm not sure I can do it." One participant expressed a feeling of being alone. He shared, "I am the only guy . . . a one-man show. I'm just spread thin with additional responsibilities outside of leading this school." Another participant had the challenge of not only running multiple programs, but also running them on the other side of the district boundaries.

Other Challenges

Other challenges areas were also noted during the interviews; however, they were not as prevalent amongst all of the participants. Some of these challenges included: curriculum quality, marketing of

program, and academic dishonesty/cheating. As one participant noted, "as virtual programs continue to increase in enrollment, more complex issues will arise." These areas could potential emerge as issues in the future and should be monitored as potential areas of future research.

During the interviews, participants also described what they perceived as the essential skills of a virtual leader. The essential skills identified by participants included being open to new ideas, taking positive risks, staying flexible, empowering staff, communicating effectively, and serving stakeholders. Additionally, participants provided insight into what behaviors influenced ineffective leadership. Participants described ineffective leaders as those who prefer the status quo, have poor relationships with others, and allow toxic behaviors.

Participants shared the requisite behaviors to overcoming the challenges faced by virtual school principals. According to participants, virtual school leaders overcome the challenges they face by being a visionary leader, taking positive risks, learning from mistakes, staying mission focused, trusting their followers, and empowering others.

Discussion

As an instructional leader of a school, the principal guides, models, measures, and evaluates the instructional practices of a school. Jacobson (2011) pointed out that direction setting, creating safe learning environments, engaging the community, developing people, and redesigning the organization are central in principal leadership at highly effective schools. These challenges are highlighted in the findings.

But what happens when the brick-and-mortar school is replaced with a virtual school? As schools across the United States faced an unprecedented reboot to a virtual environment in the Spring of 2020, K-12 educational leaders from both virtual and brick and mortar schools witnessed firsthand the challenges of virtual leadership. As schools begin to cautiously reopen, either in a virtual or blended/hybrid model, understanding the impact of evolving challenges and how to mitigate them is critical to the success of any school, regardless of environment.

As K-12 online learning opportunities continue to redefine education across the United States, the need for highly qualified and specially trained virtual school principals to meet the unique challenges of these schools is critical. Targeted, and meaningful, professional development is necessary.

Unlike the traditional, charismatic principals of the past, contemporary principals focus on collaborating and empowering others. The literature has demonstrated that the more a leader spreads and cultivates leaders within a school, the stronger the impact on student performance, specifically in reading and math (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The participants in this study were clear and indicated that one person cannot do it all. It is, therefore, essential to cultivate leadership at a school and share in the responsibility of instructional leadership at that school (Jacobson, 2011; Printy, 2010). According to Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), when a principal is perceived as being welcoming and prioritizes the safety and well-being of the school, there is a greater chance for a strong learning climate to exist at his or her school. Within a strong learning climate, sound instructional practices are evident, fewer discipline issues exist, and higher student achievement takes place.

Much like their brick-and-mortar counterpart, parent and family involvement is another challenge that virtual school principals face. In a virtual setting, principal interactions with parents and families can be very limited. When interaction does take place, it usually centers on the misconceptions of virtual schooling (Richardson et al., 2015). According to the study, principals expressed the idea that parents and families interested in enrolling their students in a virtual school are seeking an easier solution, and they do not understand the unique demands placed on students in

a virtual environment. This misconception is a clear source of frustration and an ongoing battle for many virtual leaders.

To realize the hopeful visions for the future of virtual schools shared by the principals in this study, it will be important for them to develop and hone their leadership skills through meaningful professional development that focuses on the skills identified in this study. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) identified high-quality, focused professional development as the strongest way in which a principal can positively affect instruction at a school. When there is an absence of quality professional development, instruction is more likely to falter. Through the support of professional organizations and increased access to online professional development, assistance for virtual school principals appears to improving, but much work lies ahead. As educational leadership programs continue to evolve to meet the needs of this rapidly changing arena, it will be critical to remain both current and connected to the work of virtual school principals.

Implications

This research has implications for virtual school leadership. It has been established that leadership programs need to equip future principals with the knowledge and skills required to understand and address the challenges associated with performing their job duties. Similarly, practitioners need to continue to advocate for their programs both at the district level and in the communities they serve. With a concerted effort to increase stakeholder support in new and innovative ways, virtual school principals will be better equipped to lead their schools through any challenges that may be presented. According to LaFrance and Beck (2014), one key missing component of preservice administrative programs is a lack of exposure to online learning environments. Additionally, virtual school leadership certification is also lacking. By including a virtual field experience and certification to school leadership programs, future administrators will be better equipped to lead in a virtual environment (LaFrance & Beck, 2014). Without a clear commitment and support at the state and local (district) level, according to participants, the success of learning in an online environment is less likely. Therefore, both school boards and district offices must support the efforts of virtual school principals with adequate funding and staffing. This includes being mindful of not placing additional responsibilities on principals outside of their leading virtual programs.

From a research standpoint, there is a critical need to examine further effective leadership practices in virtual education. In order to accomplish this, it is imperative that researchers continue to explore, research, and scrutinize practices in virtual school leadership. Collectively, both practioners and researchers must continue to uncover and monitor new challenges and be the driving force in support of this promising learning environment.

One participant in the study shared, "I feel strongly that virtual schools are the greatest change to education in the past 100 years." In spite of this sentiment, the overall body of research on virtual school leadership is limited when compared to other aspects of online learning; however, with the increase in enrollment and program options, more research appears to be on the horizon.

In addition, while increased participation in professional organizations and access to online professional development show some promise, researchers must increase their efforts to support research-based practices in virtual school leadership. It would appear that as quickly as virtual schools and the technology driving these schools evolves, so do the challenges facing virtual school principals. As virtual school opportunities increase in the future, it will be imperative that researchers keep a close eye on what new challenges emerge and help guide the efforts of virtual school leaders.

Conclusions

Virtual school is still an emerging educational frontier. Limited research pertaining to leading virtual schools warrants further investigation. Understanding what challenges virtual school leaders experience and how they deal with them offered insight to the aspiring virtual school leaders. A virtual school leader who understands and recognize the challenges of leading a virtual school and develop the necessary skills to navigate these challenges could foster success for the virtual school. The findings from this study could also offer insight to many traditional brick and mortar school leadership that are holding fully online classes due to COVID-19.

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