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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate New Jersey superintendents' hiring decisions of principals during the implementation of AchieveNJ, the educator evaluation system. The 2013-2014 school year was the inaugural year for AchieveNJ, and it is unknown if this new mandate has influenced superintendents' hiring decisions of principals and whether superintendents' own estimations of the new policy will shape their hiring decisions. The study described the influence, if any, AchieveNJ might have on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals.

A review of the literature indicates that superintendents' backgrounds influenced what principal qualities they looked for relating to their years of experience, education levels, district size (Dillon, 1995; Karol, 1988; Clark, 2003; Arrowood, 2005; Rammer, 2007b; Weber, 2009). Based on previous research and the lack of literature on AchieveNJ, the study investigated how a superintendent's background may also influence the leadership characteristics considered to be desirable in their hiring practices.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate if AchieveNJ influenced superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. This cross-sectional, descriptive study sought to gain background information on superintendents and the level of importance they placed on leadership characteristics of principals in the areas of instructional leadership, management, preparation and experience, and communication. Through this quantitative study, a survey was administered to New Jersey superintendents to understand their hiring decisions of principals within a year of AchieveNJ's implementation.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are superintendents' hiring decisions of principals influenced by their opinions about the new policy AchieveNJ? What importance in their hiring decisions do superintendents place on (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications?
2. To what degree is there an association between a superintendent's background and the leadership characteristics that he/she values in the principalship?
3. To what extent, if any, are there consistencies across districts regarding superintendents hiring principals?

Literature Review

Accountability Movement and Achieve NJ

An accountability trend was recognized in education reform and politics beginning in 1957 and continuing into present. In 1957, President Eisenhower gave a speech portraying American education as inferior to Russia in relation to the launch of Sputnik, approximately 1 month earlier (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). From there, in 1983, the Reagan Administration,

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published *A Nation at Risk*, a report requesting an investigation of the status of the United States educational system. The report summarized the variety of reasons American schools were failing our children (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Next, under the Clinton Administration, came Goals 2000, which set standards and goals for American education to achieve ("Goals 2000," n.d.), and this can be viewed as the predecessor to the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB is the culminating reform that first put accountability on the map. The goal of NCLB was for 100% achievement for all students by 2014 (Tienken & Orlich, 2013), an almost unachievable and unrealistic goal. To address the unrealistic expectations of NCLB, the Obama Administration and the United States Department of Education, created a contest entitled Race to the Top (RTTT). The premise of this program was that schools would adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and be in direct competition with each other and charters to gain higher point values. As a result, the schools achieving the higher point values would attract the brightest and the best students, while underperforming schools would either close or reform (USDOE, "Race to the Top Fund," n.d.). As outlined, the last 50 years of federal mandates on education reform clearly point to accountability, which sets the stage for this research in the current state of educator accountability. These accountability regulations are meant to maintain good teachers, while putting into place data that support letting bad teachers go; the same standards apply for principals. This concept is reiterated in 43 other states, as those states have adopted the CCSS and are under the same educator accountability. In relation to New Jersey, AchieveNJ can be seen as a tool to hold all educators accountable for how their students show growth.

Principal Leadership and Student Achievement

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TeachNJ and AchieveNJ were signed into law on August 6, 2012, which encompassed a bipartisan tenure reform law and effective educator evaluation system (NJDOE, 2013b). Other states made similar revisions to their evaluation systems and base educator effectiveness with proving student growth. The notion that principals can affect student achievement and to what degree they can do so is rich in research. The findings on its validity, reliability, and statistical significance as to whether or not a relationship exists between principal effectiveness and student achievement, and to what degree the parameters of effectiveness and student achievement are defined

The landmark study that laid the groundwork for proving that principals influence student achievement was by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004), titled, “Developing the Science of Educational Leadership.” They conducted a 30-year meta-analysis of research beginning in the 1970s and reviewed 5,000 studies using quantitative student achievement data. The studies ranged from 1978–2001 and covered 2,802 schools, 1.4 million students, and 14,000 teachers. As a result of their research they found the famous 21 leadership responsibilities that are related to improving student achievement, and if properly executed, would impact student achievement positively. Secondly, another prominent literature worthy of discussion in which an exhaustive review of research was conducted on leadership affecting student achievement by Leithwood et al. (2004) titled, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: Review of Research*. Collectively, these researchers were part of the Learning From Leadership Project sponsored by The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), and The Wallace Foundation. Leithwood et al. (2004) wrote, reviewed, compiled, and analyzed research and concluded that leadership is second to classroom instruction and that

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direct and indirect leadership affects student learning, which can account for one fourth of the effects on an school's overall success. Among the substantial amount of research evidencing a relationship where principals influence student achievement, the meta-analysis study based on 30 years of research serves as the flagship for proving the principal has a "substantial effect on student achievement" (Marzano et al., 2005, p.12).

Contradictions about principals' abilities to influence student achievement are present in the literature. Some research states that no matter what variables are controlled for, such as student achievement, as determined by standardized test scores, students' successes are based upon families' socioeconomic status (SES), which is defined by lone-parent household, level of parental education, and household income levels (Tienken, Tramaglino, Lynch, & Turnamian, 2013). These studies and similar ones state that SES can predict student achievement on state assessments. Hence, one can speculate that no matter what a principal does or what school initiatives are implemented, the standardized test scores will not increase if the SES is low.

Characteristics of Effective Principals

As previously discussed, the popularity of school reform emphasizing educational accountability has emerged with NCLB, RTTT, CCSS, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and AchieveNJ. These laws and initiatives hold the principal to be partially responsible for student achievement, whereas 10 years ago school reform did not have a component of school leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Research shows that principal and school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as impacting student growth (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 27; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harrison, & Hopkins, 2006). So if the principal's role is so essential to student achievement, then we need to identify the characteristics of an effective principal, which will ultimately ensure student growth. Although

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the abundance of research is plentiful and rich, there is no quintessential definitive answer to the precise characteristics of an effective leader.

Superintendents' Perceptions of the Most Valued Principal Traits

If the federal and state educational accountability mandates are here to stay and research supports the notion that school principals indirectly impact student achievement, then school districts need to ensure they hire the right person for the principalship, and that those individuals exude effective leadership characteristics. As mentioned in the previous section, there is empirical-based and theoretical-based evidence of what researchers identify as effective leadership; yet, there is not one widespread standard. However, there are accepted characteristics and practices associated with effective leadership. The role of superintendents is to hire the best candidates, and their decisions are influenced by their own personal and professional characteristics. Within the literature review, there were some similarities and some differences, but due to the varying nature and scope of the studies, the characteristics are not equally comparable. Therefore, an overall general view of the important characteristics associated with hiring principals was presented. The analysis of the studies concludes that although there is not one set standard of characteristics valued in hiring principals, many of the characteristics are similar (i.e., instructional leadership, administrative experience, teaching experience, integrity, human relation skills, professional references, etc.).

Research Methods

This quantitative study sought to identify the impact AchieveNJ has had on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals in the counties of Morris, Sussex, Warren, and Passaic during the months of October and November in 2014. The response rate was 64.2% which translated to 61 completed surveys returned.

The Findings

Superintendents' beliefs about AchieveNJ

Part 1 of the survey consisted of questions for superintendents to evaluate how important AchieveNJ is regarding their hiring decisions. The mean scores would suggest that the most important areas in order of priority to superintendents are: principal accountability, principal practice, improving student achievement, hiring effective principals, and education policy last. The survey requested superintendents to evaluate how important AchieveNJ was regarding their hiring decisions. AchieveNJ impacted the importance they attributed to principal accountability the most ($M = 3.92$).

Table 1

Mean Scores for New Jersey Superintendents' Level of Importance on AchieveNJ

| | | Principal practice | Principal accountability | Improving SA | Hiring effective principals |
|-----------|---------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>N</i> | Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>M</i> | | 3.26 | 3.74 | 3.92 | 3.69 |
| Median | | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Mode | | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| <i>SD</i> | | 1.401 | 1.471 | 1.394 | 1.348 |

Superintendents' Importance Level of Principal Leadership Characteristics

Parts 2 through 5 of the survey consisted of the importance superintendents' place on principal leadership characteristics. These sections were created to gather opinions on how the importance of each item in the areas of (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications has impacted superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. Each part has five items pertaining to the areas described above in which

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superintendents evaluated the importance level impacting their hiring decisions. The mean scores will be discussed here as well as the frequency tables.

Instructional leadership. Part 2 surveyed the importance superintendents placed on instructional leadership in hiring principals. The mean scores for each topic are outlined in Table 10. Based on the findings, the mean scores would suggest that the most important areas in order of priority to superintendents are: evaluating teachers, raising test scores, analyzing data, demonstrating instructional leadership, and introducing new technologies last. AchieveNJ impacted the importance they attributed to evaluating teachers the most ($M = 3.64$).

Table 2

Mean Scores for New Jersey Superintendents' Level of Importance on Instructional Leadership

| | Eval teachers | Test data analysis | New tech | Evidence of raising scores | Instructional leadership |
|-----------|---------------|-----------------------|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| N Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>M</i> | 3.64 | 3.54 | 3.41 | 3.61 | 3.44 |
| Median | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Mode | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| <i>SD</i> | 1.461 | 1.501 | 1.371 | 1.370 | 1.511 |

Management. Part 3 surveyed the importance superintendents considered on the topic of management when hiring principals. The mean scores suggest that the most important areas in order of importance are: executing managerial tasks, supervising staff, managing the budget, enforcing rules, and then, dealing with discipline. AchieveNJ impacted the importance they attributed to executing managerial tasks the most ($M = 3.13$).

Table 3

Mean Scores for New Jersey Superintendents' Level of Importance on Management

| | Rules | Budget | Managerial | Discipline | Supervise |
|--|-------|--------|------------|------------|-----------|
|--|-------|--------|------------|------------|-----------|

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| | | | | | | |
|-----------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| N | Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>M</i> | | 2.39 | 2.43 | 3.13 | 2.30 | 3.00 |
| Median | | 2.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 |
| Mode | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| <i>SD</i> | | 1.509 | 1.396 | 1.533 | 1.453 | 1.592 |

Preparation and experience. Part 4 surveyed the importance superintendents placed on preparation/experience in hiring principals. Based on the findings, the mean scores would suggest that the most important areas in order of priority to superintendents are: teacher experience, professional development/education, principal experience, professional demeanor, and district familiarity last. AchieveNJ impacted the importance they attributed to the principal having classroom teaching experience the most ($M = 3.16$).

Table 4

Mean Scores for New Jersey Superintendents' Level of Importance on Preparation/Experience

| | | Principal exp | Teacher exp | Familiarity | PD & educ | Prof. Demeanor |
|-----------|---------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|
| N | Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>M</i> | | 2.75 | 3.16 | 2.38 | 3.13 | 2.61 |
| Median | | 3.00 | 4.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 3.00 |
| Mode | | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| <i>SD</i> | | 1.513 | 1.572 | 1.368 | 1.522 | 1.541 |

Communication. Part 5 surveyed the importance superintendents placed on communication when hiring principals. The mean scores suggest that the most important areas in rank order are: school climate, writing, outreach, stakeholder input, and community participation last. AchieveNJ impacted the importance they attributed to fostering a school climate the most ($M = 3.03$).

Table 5

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Mean Scores for New Jersey Superintendents' Level of Importance on Communication

| | | Outreach | Stakeholders | Writing | School climate | Community |
|-----------|---------|----------|--------------|---------|----------------|-----------|
| N | Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>M</i> | | 2.89 | 2.87 | 2.97 | 3.03 | 2.67 |
| Median | | 3.00 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 3.00 |
| Mode | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>SD</i> | | 1.654 | 1.607 | 1.732 | 1.683 | 1.620 |

Superintendents' Backgrounds

Part 6 of the survey gathered background information of superintendents in five variables: district configuration, enrollment, years as a superintendent, education level, and job scope. Most of the superintendents were from K–8 districts with enrollments of 1,101 or more students, had 0 to 5 years experience as a superintendent, possessed a master's degree, and were full-time superintendents.

Data Results for Research Question 1

To what extent are superintendents' hiring decisions of principals influenced by their opinions about the new policy AchieveNJ? What importance in their hiring decisions do superintendents place on (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications?

The summary variables of superintendents' overall attitudes about AchieveNJ were created. The resulting variables were: AchieveNJ summary, instructional summary, preparation/experience summary, and communication summary. The statistical analysis used at this point in time was a Pearson correlation (r); Table 6 presents the correlations between the variables. A strong r value is associated with the correlation between AchieveNJ summary and instructional summary ($r = .799, p < 0.000$). This means that superintendents' overall attitudes

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about AchieveNJ are strongly correlated with their attitudes about instructional leadership and that relationship is statistically significant. Furthermore, since r is positive, this means the more value superintendents placed on AchieveNJ the more value they also would place on instructional leadership. In fact, it was the strongest variable out of the all of summary variables.

Table 6

Correlations of Summary Variables

| | | AchieveNJ summary | Instructional summary | Management summary | PrepExp summary | Comm summary |
|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| AchieveNJ summary | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .799** | .479** | .616** | .597** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | n | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| Instructional summary | Pearson Correlation | .799** | 1 | .650** | .736** | .710** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | n | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| Management summary | Pearson Correlation | .479** | .650** | 1 | .797** | .783** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | | .000 | .000 |
| | n | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| PrepExp summary | Pearson Correlation | .616** | .736** | .797** | 1 | .839** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .000 |
| | n | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| Comm summary | Pearson Correlation | .597** | .710** | .783** | .839** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | n | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The means for all summary variables range from 14 – 18. AchieveNJ had the highest mean of all the summary variables ($M = 18.2459$), which means that the majority of superintendents felt AchieveNJ impacted their hiring decisions. The next highest mean was associated with instructional leadership ($M = 17.6393$), which suggests that AchieveNJ changed

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the importance attributed to the principal's ability to be an instructional leader. Results are displayed in Table 7 below.

Table 7

Mean Scores for Summary Variables

| | | AchieveNJ summary | Instructional summary | Management summary | Prep/Exp summary | Comm summary |
|--------|---------|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| N | Valid | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| | Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| M | | 18.2459 | 17.6393 | 13.2459 | 14.0328 | 14.4262 |
| Median | | 20.0000 | 20.0000 | 13.0000 | 16.0000 | 17.0000 |
| Mode | | 23.00 | 20.00 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 5.00 |
| SD | | 6.37091 | 6.53971 | 6.57940 | 6.42123 | 7.75341 |

The second part of this research question was to investigate the importance superintendents' place on (a) instructional leadership, (b) management, (c) preparation and experience, and (d) communications in their hiring decisions. As described above, instructional leadership was the strongest characteristic superintendents considered when hiring principals given AchieveNJ. The weakest characteristic was management; therefore, one can conclude that since AchieveNJ has been in existence, superintendents value instructional leadership as the most important factor when hiring principals.

Data Results for Research Question 2

To what degree is there an association between a superintendent's background and the leadership characteristics that he/she values in the principalship?

The background variables examined were district configurations, enrollment, years as a superintendent, education level, and job scope. Since the variables defining superintendents' backgrounds are both numeric and nominal, it was necessary to conduct two different statistical

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analyses. First, the numeric variables, years as a superintendent and district enrollment, were correlated with the summary variables. After correlating these variables in SPSS with the summary variables, the findings suggest that the years as a superintendent and district enrollment were not significantly related.

Next, the nominal variables of district configuration, education level, and job scope were examined by running a variety of statistical analysis, such as a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), independent *t* test, and crosstabs with chi-square. The ANOVA model was not statistically significant as evidenced by $p = .428$. These findings suggest that there is no significant difference between AchieveNJ summary and superintendent's district configuration; hence, the district configuration does not impact the answers on the survey regarding AchieveNJ.

To test the variable education level, I chose to run an independent *t* test with AchieveNJ summary to compare the mean of one sample with the mean of another sample and conclude if there is a significant difference among the two. The independent *t* test was not statistically significant as evidenced by $p = .868$. These results purport that although the two variables have different means, those means are not statistically significant; therefore, superintendents' education levels has no impact on their opinions about AchieveNJ.

The third statistical analysis conducted on the last nominal variable was a crosstab with chi-square with AchieveNJ summary and job scope. In running crosstabs in SPSS, I identified the numbers were too small for reporting purposes, so no statistical analysis was necessary. The description here suggests that a superintendent's job scope has no bearing on his/her evaluation of AchieveNJ.

The outcomes regarding the summary variables of how superintendents answered Parts 1 through 5 of the survey compared to any impact their years as a superintendent and district

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enrollment had on them was not statistically significant; therefore, background information had no impact on how superintendents answered the survey. Likewise, superintendents' district configurations, education levels, and job scope are not significant indicators of their AchieveNJ evaluations. These findings suggest that superintendents' backgrounds do not impact their opinions when hiring principals.

Data Results for Research Question 3

To what extent, if any, are there consistencies across districts regarding superintendents hiring principals?

Most of the superintendents were from K–8 districts with enrollments of 1,101 or more students, had 0 to 5 years experience as a superintendent, possessed a master's degree, and were full-time superintendents. Overall the results of the five subquestions on how important AchieveNJ is regarding superintendents' hiring decisions of principals was either *important* or *very important* to the majority of superintendents, where they had to evaluate the importance level of how AchieveNJ impacted the importance attributed to education policy, principal practice, principal accountability, improving student achievement, and hiring effective principals. For each principal leadership characteristic, there were some interesting results. Instructional leadership was important to the majority of superintendents in all five subquestions. Background information on each superintendent was gathered and analyzed. All findings suggest that district configuration, years as a superintendent, enrollment, education level, and job scope were not statistically significant for impacting their opinions of hiring principals regarding AchieveNJ.

Conclusion

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AchieveNJ is the controversial, newly instituted educator evaluation policy, which mandates that New Jersey teachers and principals be evaluated on NJDOE approved criteria, one being how well they can improve student achievement as measured by state assessments and student growth objectives. Since AchieveNJ has completed its first implementation year, little or no data are available on its effects on educational practice, specifically on superintendents' hiring decisions of principals. Therefore, this study addressed the literature gap. With the richness of literature in accountability and the notion of principals impacting student achievement, the logical progression is to identify if New Jersey's AchieveNJ mandate has any influence on the hiring decisions of superintendents.

When superintendents were asked to evaluate the importance of AchieveNJ regarding their hiring decisions of principals, specifically identifying if AchieveNJ impacted the importance attributed to: education policy, principal practice, principal accountability, improving student achievement, and hiring effective principals, 77% (47 out of 61) said that principal accountability was *very important* or *important*. This was the highest percentage on any part of the frequency tables with the entire survey. These results conclude that the majority of superintendents in the sample said that the AchieveNJ factors impacted the importance they placed when making hiring decisions for principals. At a cursory glance, AchieveNJ increases the probability of keeping great principals and getting rid of the bad ones.

When superintendents were asked to rank the principal leadership characteristics, the findings from the summary variables correlation showed superintendents' value: instructional leadership, preparation/experience, communication, and management last. These findings contribute to the substantial literature base regarding qualities of an effective leader and the array of characteristics superintendents' value (Arrowood, 2005; Cotton, 2003; Dillon, 1995;

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Leithwood et al., 2004; O'Malley, 2011; Van Meter & Murphy, 1997). The difference in this study is that AchieveNJ was the variable impacting superintendents' views on the four principal characteristics when making hiring decisions. One can infer that AchieveNJ has forced superintendents to consider the factors in rank order when hiring principals.

There were five indicators defining the superintendents' backgrounds, where the survey asked superintendents to identify their district configuration, student enrollment, years as a superintendent, education level, and job scope; yet, there was no statistical significance in these variables. These findings suggest that superintendents make evaluations about hiring principals independently of their backgrounds and their districts' backgrounds. Any outside information such as superintendents' district configurations, education levels, and job scope had no impact on the characteristics they valued.

In order for this study to situate itself in the larger literature base, replication is the most important recommendation for future research. If this study were to be conducted in all 21 New Jersey counties in the 2015-2016 school year, we would have the most comprehensive data on the power AchieveNJ has over superintendents and their hiring decisions of principals. This study lays the groundwork for all future studies regarding the effects of AchieveNJ. The essence of this study serves the most vital data analysis available at this point in time. While at first glance educators may shy away from being held accountable, it is nothing more than documenting what it means to be an effective principal. The only difference is that now it is the law.

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