

Aspiring Leader Internship Experiences in a Full Time and Online Internship

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Introduction

With heightened emphasis on school leadership and the call for greater accountability, leadership preparation programs must evolve to meet the needs of today's principals. Numerous indictments against educational administration programs have surfaced over the last two decades (Levine, 2005), requiring a significant shift in the way we "do the business" of equipping school leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively and efficiently run America's schools. Dodson (2014) noted that principal preparation programs have been criticized "for not ensuring that graduates are 'ready' for principalship" stressing that graduates "lack the skills to step right in as effective leaders" (p. 42). Further, Levine (2005) charged that principal preparation programs generally are unrelated to how schools actually function. A reexamination of this claim motivated universities to consider principal preparation training. Universities thus have responded to this charge by redesigning practicum experiences of aspiring leaders.

High quality principal internships have been cited throughout the literature as one of the essential components of an effective preparation program. Internships that provide application of knowledge gained in the classroom allow the aspiring leader real world experiences under the guidance of a mentor (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). While high quality programs are important to principal preparation, Orr and Orphanos (2011) indicate quality is insufficient. Aspiring principals "must have both high quality preparation and high quality internships to experience learning benefits that positively influence their subsequent leadership practices" (p. 48). Studies of leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Devita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007; Dilworth & Thomas, 2001) have consistently found similar components across exemplary leadership preparation programs. These components, if implemented with fidelity, lead to outcomes which included principals who felt they were better

prepared to lead instruction and garner support from all stakeholders, were more positive about the work of a principal, had a greater intent to stay in the field of administration, and were better able to develop a school vision. Moreover, schools with principals who focused on instructional leadership found increased student achievement and greater job satisfaction in their teachers (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007).

In keeping with the UCEA 2018 conference theme of challenging researchers to reimagine our work and our preparation of leaders, we look to two programs at one state land grant research university. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do principal interns and their mentor principals perceive the online program internship has supported the interns in mastering the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) standards in a university online program?
2. How do principal interns and their mentor principals perceive the full time residency internship has supported the interns in mastering the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) standards?

The interns and mentors surveyed in this study have participated in internship experiences that are atypical from the traditional internship of many principal preparation programs. Specifically, we examine two approaches to the principal preparation internship, one designed as a full-time residency internship and one designed for an asynchronous online program. Findings from this study may inform programs that are considering online delivery systems, yet concerned with maintaining the quality of the internship experience with students who are geographically located at some distance from the university. Furthermore, programs that seek to offer a full time internship may be interested in the design and delivery of residency internship.

Review of Literature

University principal preparation programs have faced criticism for graduating students who are unprepared for school leadership. Too many new principals acquire leadership expertise through on-the-job training or through trial and error experiences. Literature has repeatedly found that administrative internships are key to preparing aspiring leaders (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014; Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Authentic internship experiences are the hallmark of quality principal preparation programs (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Furthermore, quality internships also provide an opportunity for interns to reflect on these experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Salazar, Pazey, & Zembik, 2013). Orr and Orphanos (2011) found a strong relationship between the quality of the internship experience and the strength of leadership practices. Moreover, their research indicated that field experiences contributed “significantly to what and how much they [interns] learn about effective leadership and, through what they learn, how they subsequently function as school leaders” (p. 48).

Providing a “full range of essential skills” should be the goal of any quality internship (Eiseman & Militello, 2008, p. 3), as opposed to limiting experiences to the needs of the school or the interests of the intern. Designing the internship to allow a variety of opportunities then allows for the analysis of “how they [interns] handled their responsibilities from multiple perspectives” (p. 3).

The internship is only as successful as the practicing principal, who serves as mentor, provides experiences for learning. Specific to this success is opportunity to work closely with a mentor to gain “insight, the opportunity to observe day-to-day practicalities of leadership, and the

competent modeling of activities like data gathering” (Dodson, 2014, p. 50). Collaboration between interns and mentors is essential to building meaningful opportunities (Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014). Orr and Orphanos (2011) specifically point to characteristics of exemplary preparation programs, including “quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner-mentor” (p. 22). These researchers also point out the importance of exemplary programs using professional standards as the basis for assessment and continuous improvement.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) note that exemplary principal preparation programs provide opportunities for understanding how principals make decisions. Mentors who spend time with interns, discussing and describing how they arrived at decisions are invaluable to interns when they begin to lead schools and must make decisions on their own. Approaches to problem solving and the ensuing consequences are skills that mentors can model for interns (Clayton & Thessin, 2016).

However, internships may fail in providing opportunities to interns that address all the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required for a successful principal. Moreover, mentors may be uncomfortable allowing interns to participate in some administrative activities if they deem the intern is not prepared to take on specific tasks (Eiseman & Militello, 2008).

In most states, instructional leader licensing requires a minimum score on the School Leader Licensing Assessment, which is largely based on the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Thus, hands-on experiences and opportunities to lead should be framed in the PSEL standards, not only to prepare interns for the licensing exam but also to allow interns to work toward

mastery of the standards under which they will work. Reasonably, quality internship experiences should include mastery of these standards.

Methodology

This quantitative study measured perceptions of principal interns, mentors, and university facilitators regarding the extent to which intern experiences supported mastery of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Furthermore, we examined any differences in responses between those preparing for the principalship with the full-time internship program and those preparing with the asynchronous online program. The survey's Likert Scale ranged from 1 (below expectations) to 4 (exceeds expectations) for mastery of experiences under each standard.

The University of Tennessee offers two principal preparation programs, The Leadership Academy, which offers a full time residency internship, and the Volunteer Online Leadership Studies (V.O.L.S.) online program, which offers a site based internship experience in numerous locales across the state. Participants in this study were the interns and intern mentors as well as, in the case of the online program, university facilitators. We first provide an overview of both programs, including successes achieved and challenges faced by each program. Following, we provide findings and offer recommendations for principal preparation programs considering internship designs which vary from the traditional.

Full Time Residency Internship

The full-time program is an intensive 15-month principal preparation residency program. The internship is a district appointment as a school administrator (typically an Assistant Principal) four days a week under the direction and guidance of an experienced and successful mentor principal. The intern is released for the fifth day to attend university classes and

seminars, following a rigorous curriculum with a focus on the agency of school leadership. Critical to the internship experience is the purposeful integration of theory and practice. Interns submit written reflections about their internship experience in light of the Professional Standards for School Leadership, as well as provide artifacts of their leadership development that speak to each standard. Regular and structured leadership coaching with a trained and experienced coach is also a crucial component of the internship.

Unique Attributes

The full-time program internship encompasses a school-based administrative residency that exceeds 1,000 hours. At least 350 of those hours are specifically focused on developing capabilities associated with the PSEL standards (as well as Tennessee state leadership standards), and are documented with an activity log, a written reflection pertaining to each standard, as well as an artifact demonstrating progress toward mastery of each standard. In addition, the full-time program includes an Aspiring Leaders Seminar course throughout the 15-month experience, the purpose of which is explicitly to integrate and reconcile the internship experience with the leadership standards, as well as the theory and research taught in the courses. The “scaffolding” of the Aspiring Leaders Seminar is further strengthened by a faculty position entitled “Principal in Residence.” The Principal in Residence is a former successful school principal of long-standing who both facilitates the Seminar, and conducts monthly individual leadership coaching sessions with each of the interns, which are focused on building capacity to meet the PSEL standards.

Successes

The internship is consistently seen as a vital component of the full-time principal preparation program, known as the Leadership Academy. Through surveys and feedback, the

interns have expressed their satisfaction with the internship experience, and their appreciation of the marriage of theory and practice that characterizes the program. One respondent noted that the internship experience “has trained me for any leadership position in my district when the opportunity arises!”

The full-time Leadership Academy has an exemplary record of utilizing the internship to prepare interns to take and pass the School Leader Licensure Assessment (SLLA), with a 100% passing rate. In addition, a recent study by one partner school system found that Leadership Academy interns are exceptionally well prepared for leadership by their internship experience, with full-time program graduates earning higher performance evaluation scores than their peers, as well as better student learning outcomes.

Challenges

While the full-time program’s internship and overall principal preparation effort has been extremely successful, it has not been without its challenges. Among these are the requirement that each district create or commit a school administrative position (typically an Assistant Principal) for the internship. This requires a material commitment of resources for each of the program’s partner school systems. In addition, the internship is only four days per week, with the interns attending university coursework on the fifth day. This creates challenges in two ways: 1) the school is without one member of the administrative team for 20% of the time school is in session, and 2) the interns are occasionally absent for seminal events, meetings, and activities at school, or may sometimes miss out on critical aspects of school culture. This challenge is mitigated by giving interns some case by case flexibility to be at school if an important event is scheduled, but this certainly does not fully resolve the dilemma.

Online Program Internship

The online leadership program is an asynchronous masters and education specialist program, state approved to prepare candidates for an instructional leader license. This 36 credit hour masters program and the 42 credit hour education specialist program, which also includes a research component, involves both coursework and a 350 hour internship. The teaching philosophy of online faculty is to serve as a bridge between theory and practice, with an emphasis on case studies and project based experiential learning.

The Internship Component

In designing the internship experience for an online program, the faculty wanted to ensure that the components of exemplary programs (see Darling-Hammond et al., 2007 and Orr & Orphanos, 2011) were included, despite the geographic distance from both the university and locations across the state. Components that were emphasized in the design were the inclusion of mentor training, a site based university facilitator, reflective practice, standards base, thoughtful collaboration between mentor and intern, assessment from multiple perspectives, a course component to support the internship, and individual video conferencing between professors and interns.

The internship is a collaborative endeavor of three, including the intern, the mentor (chosen through a discussion between school, university, and district approvals), and a university facilitator. Since the online program includes students from throughout the state and, sometimes from beyond the state, area facilitators, who are retired district officials or principals, are employed to work with the intern and the mentor at the school site to ensure standards-based leadership opportunities are provided. The intern is required to complete a minimum of 25 hours of leadership experiences under each of the PSEL and Tennessee Instructional Leader (TIL)

standards. Experiences are designed through the collaborative discussions of the intern, the mentor, and the facilitator.

Unique Attributes

Mentors are trained prior to the beginning of the internship. A handbook of expectations and responsibilities guide the training. The university facilitator meets in person with each mentor to explain the program and emphasize the importance of providing opportunities that allow the interns to master PSEL and TIL standards. Literacy standards are also required of leadership interns, a component with which practicing principals (mentors) may not be familiar. The mentors are asked to document intern experiences and the standards under which the experiences fall as interns are required to complete 25 hours of experiences under each standard.

Mentors are also asked to have frequent discussion time with interns, using this discussion time to articulate their thought processes on how they came to decisions, the necessary data needed for specific problem solving, and the consequences of decisions made and not made. Interns are required to upload reflections and artifacts to an online portfolio regarding these discussions and their experiences.

The internship duration is two years, during which the interns take an internship course each fall semester. During the first year, the course content emphasis are the standards, that is, PSEL, TILS, and Literacy. Content during the second year is project based, designed to allow students to add to their intern experiences. For example, students are assigned to interview several teachers about the vision and mission of the school, responding to the following:

Do the teachers know the vision/mission? Do they incorporate the mission and vision into their teaching? Were teachers involved in developing the vision/mission? What does the vision/mission mean to them? If you find that the vision/mission is a part of the

teacher culture, explain what you think was done to make it so. If it is not a part of the culture, explain what you might do when you lead a school to make it so.

Another assignment is a discussion with the principal mentor. Students are to interview an administrator asking:

How do they build consensus among different stakeholders. What methods do they use? Do they use different methods for different stakeholders (faculty, parents, students, businesses)? Consider what methods you might use to build consensus when you are a school leader.

Throughout the semester, in addition to visits from the university facilitator, students take part in individual ‘check in’ video conferences with their professors. These conferences are meant to discuss progress, student dispositions, and any concerns regarding the internship or coursework. At the end of each academic year, the intern, the mentor, and the facilitator complete the same assessment, evaluating the extent to which they each perceive the student has mastered the standards.

Successes

Interns, mentors, and facilitators have all expressed satisfaction with the quality of the internship. Graduate and employer surveys have also revealed that novice principals who have completed this internship have begun their work as a principal prepared to lead, make decisions, and build strong school cultures.

A requirement for the masters and education specialist degree is that the student must take and score minimum proficiency on the ETS School Leader Licensing Assessment. As of this year, the students in the VOLS Lead online program have a 100% passage rate.

Challenges

The VOLS Lead online program has experienced two major challenges that have not yet been overcome. First, the program is expensive, both in time and money. The cost of hiring facilitators to serve interns across the state has been high, including stipends, travel, recruitment of quality personnel, and the time spent individually training mentor principals in the expectations of this program. Nonetheless, our program belief in the essential nature of the internship to the leadership success of our graduates continues our investment.

The second challenge is perception. Changing the perception that online delivery cannot equate to quality education is one that we must persistently address. We have found that the best way to counter this perception is to continue to graduate interns ready to lead schools successfully.

Findings

Findings across both programs indicate that students feel confident in their learning experiences and ready to lead schools. Mentors in both programs evaluate the aspiring leaders as having had a successful internship experience. The following sections will articulate each program and the perceptions of the participants. For purposes of this paper and to answer the research questions, only PSEL standards will be addressed.

Full Time Residency Internship

Participants in the full-time program typically found the internship to be both of great value and well-structured to support the development of critical knowledge and skills for leadership. When asked in a survey if the internship exposed them to a variety of administrative activities, all respondents (33% response rate, n=5) in the full-time program answered “agree” or “strongly agree.” Likewise, when asked if the internship prepared them for an administrative

position, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with a mean score of 3.75 out of 4.00. One respondent remarked about the comprehensive nature of the internship, stating that “my internship experience, while unique, provided me with support and knowledge to hone my leadership skills in my work with teachers, budgets, state requirements, and program management (HR, legalities, building vision and efficacy, etc.).”

While generally a very positive experience for the candidates in the full-time program, the internship was not universally so. While virtually all agreed or strongly agreed that their internship was a positive experience, and that their mentor was supportive, one respondent indicated disagreement with these conditions. Interestingly, the negative responses to these questions did not correlate to negative responses to other questions about how well the internship and the program as a whole developed their skills and prepared the respondent for leadership.

In the full-time program, the internship is coupled with an Aspiring Leaders Seminar that seeks to process the internship experience in light of state and national leadership standards. The responses to participant surveys for this seminar have been overwhelmingly positive, with all respondents strongly agreeing that the course was challenging and contributed to their understanding and learning. One respondent noted that the seminar provided “multiple opportunities to become familiar with the administrator standards and how they are applicable to our internship.”

Overall, interns saw the internship as a remarkable opportunity to apply knowledge and skills developed in coursework in a real-life administrative setting. One intern summed it up this way: “The embedded job training brought all the aspects of the academic work to life during the course of the program making my learning practical as well as deepening my theoretical knowledge of school leadership.”

Current interns have completed a survey regarding their level of confidence that they can successfully engage in activities that indicate mastery of dispositions aligned with the PSEL standards. While this is essentially a pre-treatment survey that has been administered for the first time with the current cohort of interns (92% response rate, n=11), the results may be telling. While surveys of graduates have demonstrated confidence in their preparation and leadership, the pre-treatment surveys show that respondents indicated that they felt confident in their mastery of these dispositional attributes in only 46% of the possible instances. While these data will need to be specifically paired and compared to the graduate surveys in the future, these outcomes suggest significant growth in both confidence and mastery of leadership standards through the completion of the internship.

Online Program Internship

The program assessment was completed by 25 mentors who served during the 2017-2018 academic year, along with 24 interns (total n = 25), and 10 facilitators. Participants were asked to evaluate the intern (and the interns to self-evaluate) the extent to which the interns met or exceeded each PSEL standard/substandard. Table 1 outlines each item and the percent of the whole that each group evaluated by meet or exceeds.

As can be seen from Table 1, in every case both the mentor and the facilitator evaluated the intern as exceeded the standard while the intern self-scored much lower, sometimes by a wide margin. Furthermore, in every case except one, the mentors scored the interns higher than the facilitator. The exception to this was substandard 8c: The intern maintains a presence in the community to understand its strengths and needs, develop productive relationships, and engage

its resources for the school. In this case, the mentors indicated that 64% of the interns exceeded the standard while the facilitators perceived that 73.9% exceeded the standard.

A third category, not indicated on Table 1, was that of ‘developing standard.’ The survey instructions noted that this category was one in which the intern knew and understood the standard, yet had not demonstrated actions or behaviors which implied a mastery of the standard. The mentors and facilitators did not score any interns at this level. However, there were some instances where interns self-scored in this category. If the intern does not perceive confidence in these standards, then the preparation program needs to reconsider how the standard is translated to practice during the internship.

This was particularly salient in PSEL Standard 3, Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, where 4 of 25 interns indicated they felt they were developing rather than meeting the standard in 4b, c, d, and e (see Table 1 for a complete description of each standard). In PSEL Standard 6b, 9 of 25 interns indicated that they were at the development stage in capacity, opportunities and support for teacher leaders. Finally, in PSEL Standard 7b, 6 of 25 interns scored themselves as developing in holding both teachers and staff accountable for student success. The program faculty must reexamine coursework emphasis and facilitators must dialogue with mentors to ensure that interns are taking part in experiences that increase intern aptitude in these areas.

Discussion

Traditional principal preparation internships, as described in the literature, are the predominant means by which to prepare aspiring leaders. Often a check list of tasks to accomplish prior to internship completion, internships are sometimes insufficient to appropriately train students to graduate ready to take on the work of a principal. This paper has presented two alternative options to the traditional internship.

While the Leadership Academy and the VOLS Lead asynchronous online program differ greatly in structure, there are several common internship elements which have contributed to the success of both programs. For both, reflecting upon experiences has been essential. Schoen (1987) recommended that by reflecting on practice, we learn that practice. Interns in these programs are asked to think about what they observe or the tasks they perform, then reflect on what worked, what didn't work, what might have been done differently, and what they might do once they begin to lead a school. Building a repertoire of actions and behaviors again speaks to the reflective practitioner about which Schoen wrote.

Both programs are standards based, the profession's standards (PSEL), the state standards (TILS), and literacy standards. As the students approach their internship experiences, grounding the opportunities in professional standards allows them to view the experiences as the work of leadership, rather than coursework assignments. Moreover, standards based assignments are not university defined but are a collaborative effort of the mentor and intern. Thus, the intern may take the lead on problem solving or constructing a response to an issue or a need at the school where they intern.

Both programs include an internship course (Aspiring Leader Seminar) which is taken concurrently with the internship. The course allows students to understand the skills and dispositions required to lead schools, the standards under which they will work, and add to their knowledge through standards based projects.

While we believe the non-traditional path we have taken to prepare principals has been successful, continuous improvement remains a goal. Barriers such as resources and negative perceptions of online delivery remain. Nonetheless, we remain committed to this path.

Change for educators is not easy. However, with guidance and recommendations from previous research and support from our university, we consider the full time residency internship and the online internship successful. Our students articulate that they agree.

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Table 1.

Intern, Mentor, and Facilitator Perceptions of Extent to Which Intern Mastered PSEL Standards in Online Internship.

PSEL	Intern		Mentor		Facilitator	
	Exceeds	Meets	Exceeds	Meets	Exceeds	Meets
1a: The intern has developed shared understanding of and commitment to mission, vision, and core values within the school and the community	37.50%	54.17%	84%	16%	69.57%	30.43%
1b: The intern models and pursues the school's mission, vision, and core values in all aspects of leadership.	45.83%	54.17%	80%	20%	65.22%	34.78%
2 a: The intern acts ethically and professionally in personal conduct, relationships with others, decision-making, stewardship of the school's resources, and all aspects of school leadership.	58.33%	41.67%	80%	20%	69.57%	30.43%
2b: The intern acts according to and promotes the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.	70.83%	25%	83.33%	12.50%	73.91%	26.09%
2c: The intern places children at the center of education and accepts responsibility for each student's academic success and well-being.	70.83%	25%	91.67%	8.33%	82.61%	17.39%
2d: The intern provides moral direction for the school and promote ethical and professional behavior among faculty and staff.	50%	50%	75%	25%	69.57%	30.43%
3a: The intern ensures that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.	62.50%	37.50%	84%	16%	73.91%	26.09%
3b: The intern recognizes, respects, and employs each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning.	50%	37.50%	84%	16%	60.87%	39.13%
3c: The intern ensures that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.	41.67%	41.67%	64%	36%	43.48%	52.17%

3d: The intern confronts and alters institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.	50%	33.33%	64%	36%	47.83%	52.17%
3e: The intern promotes the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.	45.83%	37.50%	72%	28%	56.52%	39.13%
3f: The intern acts with cultural competence and responsiveness in their interactions, decision-making, and practice.	45.83%	54.17%	84%	16%	60.87%	39.13%
3g: The intern promotes the personal and professional health, well-being, and work-life balance of faculty and staff.	37.50%	62.50%	68%	32%	65.22%	34.78%
5: The intern cultivates an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.	62.5%	37.5%	76%	24%	60.87%	39.13%
6a: The intern empowers and motivates teachers and staff to the highest levels of professional practice and to continuous learning and improvement.	29.17%	50%	60%	40%	73.91%	26.09%
6b: The intern develops the capacity, opportunities, and support for teacher leadership and leadership from other members of the school community.	20.83%	41.67%	52.00%	48%	78.26%	21.74%
6c: The intern promotes the personal and professional health, well-being, and work-life balance of faculty and staff.	33.33%	54.17%	56%	44%	39.13%	60.87%
7a: The intern creates and sustains positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students.	37.50%	50%	80%	20%	60.87%	39.13%
7b: The intern promotes mutual accountability among teachers and other professional staff for each student's success and the effectiveness of the school as a whole.	20.83%	54.17%	68%	32%	69.57%	30.43%
7c: The intern develops and supports open, productive, caring, and trusting working relationships among leaders, faculty, and staff to promote professional capacity and the improvement of practice.	29.17%	62.50%	88%	12%	60.87%	34.78%

8a: The intern is approachable, accessible, and welcoming to families and members of the community.	54.17%	41.67%	83.33%	16.67%	82.61%	13.04%
8b: The intern creates and sustains positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students.	58.33%	37.50%	83.33%	16.67%	75%	20.83%
8c: The intern maintains a presence in the community to understand its strengths and needs, develop productive relationships, and engage its resources for the school.	41.67%	33.33%	64%	36%	73.91%	26.09%
8d: The interns understands, values, and employs the community's cultural, social, intellectual, and political resources to promote student learning and school improvement.	41.67%	45.83%	64%	36%	56.52%	43.48%
9: The intern manages school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.	16.67%	58.33%	56%	44%	47.83%	47.83%
10a: The intern engages others in an ongoing process of evidence-based inquiry, learning, strategic goal setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation for continuous school and classroom improvement.	33.33%	45.83%	70.83%	29.17%	65.22%	34.78%
10b: The intern manages uncertainty, risk, competing initiatives, and politics of change with courage and perseverance, providing support and encouragement, and openly communicating the need for, process for, and outcomes of improvement efforts.	25%	50%	64%	36%	47.83%	52.17%