Understanding the Challenge: The Worklife of a Principal in an Achieving Urban Elementary School with a Large Number of At-risk Students

Marilyn Price Lovett

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Stephen R. Parson, Committee Co-Chair
Robert R. Richards, Committee Co-chair
David J. Parks
Glen I. Earthman
Vikki Y. Rehnback

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(ABSTRACT)

A number of significant changes have occurred in our public schools in recent years. These changes include shifting federal program priorities, adoption of state curriculum standards, and the implementation of site-based decision-making. These changes come at a time when schools are experiencing significant changes in the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of their student body and when many families are struggling to meet challenges arising from poverty or job requirements. Attention has been given to the impact these changes are having on teachers, parents, and students. Little attention has been given, however, to the impact these changes are having on principals.

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of a principal's worklife in an achieving urban elementary school with a large number of at-risk students. The study examined one principal's methods of dealing with everyday problems associated with leading in a school that serves children of color and 98% of the students meet low-income criteria (i.e., they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch). Over the past five years, second grade students showed increases in reading beyond those achieved by minority students in the school division. Attendance rates over the past five years show improvement.

Interviews, observations, and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1995) were used to collect data. From these data, a case study was written. The report of case study findings describes the worklife of the principal, school characteristics, and school outcomes. Conclusions drawn from the case study indicate that the worklife of the principal has similarities to the worklife of other elementary principals. However, due to school characteristics and external factors elementary

principals serving in urban schools with a large number of at-risk students can expect an escalated level of intensity and demand on a daily basis.

Findings of this study have relevance for urban elementary school principals desiring to increase achievement. Further, findings suggest that urban elementary schools serving a large number of at-risk students can achieve successful outcomes.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in loving memory

To my Beloved Mother,

My father, whose quiet abiding love taught me great values

And gave me the gifts of strength and fortitude,

And

Kymber, whose unconditional love, determination, and passion to serve others

Sustain me daily.

I hope, in some small way, this work honors their lives.

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