

## **Examining a University-Multiple District Sponsored Academy from the Perspective of Principal Supervisors**

Pamela R. Hallam, EdD  
Chairperson,  
Educational Leadership and Foundations  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, UT

David M. Boren, PhD  
Director  
School Leadership Program  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, UT

### **Abstract**

Many universities partner with school districts in providing professional development for school leaders through a principal's academy. Since 2002, Brigham Young University and five local districts, representing approximately one-third of all of the students in the state of Utah, have sponsored the BYU Principals Academy to meet the professional development needs throughout the five-district area.

While previous research has focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of academy participants, this qualitative study explored the views of participants' district supervisors, collected during a focus group experience. Participants were asked how the academy had impacted the district, how it could better meet districts' needs, how the university and districts could more effectively partner, and how its effectiveness could be accurately evaluated.



2006). In 2013, the National Association for Secondary School Principals published a report entitled: *What the Research Says About the Importance of Principal Leadership*. In this document they recommend, “The content and focus [of principal professional development] should be individualized, with a tight link between principal evaluation and development opportunities ... and efforts should be made to provide development that is job-embedded” (p. 10). Spanneut and colleagues specified, “Principals need continuous opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Professional development opportunities should be tailored to the needs of the participants and geared to actual leadership roles” (2012, p. 26).

Finding practical ways to build the capacity of principals is paramount as it has been shown to impact the academic achievement of students and the overall quality of our schools. One approach for providing principal development with the above characteristics is for districts to partner with universities in sponsoring principal institutes or academies (Peterson, 2002).

Chapman provided some clear criteria to districts and universities interested in providing the most effective professional development to principals

Vital to leadership learning is the interplay of a number of elements: study of the relevant theoretical disciplines and the substantive domains of professional knowledge and competence; critically reflective practice; engagement in field-based learning activities and peer-supported networks. A co-operative approach among learning providers is required to enable coverage of all elements (2005, p. 15).

The Brigham Young University Principals Academy (BYUPA) was initiated in 2002 as a unified way for the university and five local school districts to collaboratively support the learning and development of principals.

The BYU-Public School Partnership’s Governing Board consists of the superintendents from all of the five partner school districts, the CITES director

these supervisors we have gained significant understanding that is guiding improvements in our Principals Academy function and outcomes.

More specifically, we asked the following research questions:

1. What impact has the BYUPA had on your district?
2. How can the university partner with district leadership in determining the primary learning outcomes of the academy?
3. How might the university and districts effectively partner in selecting participants, ensuring participation, supporting participants in applying their learning experience?
4. How should the effectiveness of the BYUPA be evaluated?

## Methods

In seeking to gain clarity on these questions, we used purposive sampling, focus group interviews, with qualitative methods of analysis. Having over 16 principal supervisors who could have been included in this study, we employed a purposive, non-randomized, maximum variation sampling scheme with the intent to create a focus group that most closely represented the districts being sampled (Patton, 2002). We chose to stratify our sample by district (five participating), gender (male or female), and the school level supervised (elementary or secondary). Due to principal supervisors' schedules, our final focus group had fewer participants than we had initially hoped, but sufficient variation to make the results meaningful. The seven participants represented four of the five partnership districts, with a balance of elementary and secondary principal supervisors; one participant was female and six were male. (See Table 1)

Table 1

*District Student Count, District Participation and Principal Supervisor Gender and Participation*

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\*Participated in focus group

\*\*Invited but unable to participate in focus group

We chose to use a focus group because “a group session has chemistry and dynamic that are more than the sum of its members’ comments ... The synergy in the group interaction usually prompts greater breadth and depth of information and comparison of views” than individual interviews (Carey & Asbury, 2012, pp. 11, 18). In preparation for the group session, we created a bank of semi-structured interview questions for data collection. Our initial qualitative analysis followed the basic framework proposed by Marshall and Rossman (1999) of organizing the data; generating categories, themes, and patterns; coding the data; testing emergent understandings and searching for alternative explanations; and writing the report.

We split our research team into two groups, tasking each to simultaneously organize the data and generate themes. A third independent group then sought to reconcile, summarize, and synthesize the work of these two into meaningful themes, patterns, relationships, and recommendations. We are confident that this quasi double-blind approach led us to the most important themes, patterns, and relationships identified by the principal

spoke about the various themes. We provide each research question, along with selected answers from supervisors, accompanied by supporting external research. We hope that this reporting process will allow readers to easily transfer these findings to their unique situations.

### **Research Question 1: What impact has the BYUPA had on your district?**

Most of the district supervisors reported enthusiasm and appreciation for the impact the BYUPA has had and continues to have on the attending principals. Many spoke of it as a “career highlight” (B2), continuing that the “readings are on point, the guest speakers are enlightening, and the learning is cutting edge” (B2).

#### **Networking**

Our supervisors acknowledged that principals have a demanding role and often feel isolated and inadequate to handle the demands of the position thus networking has been one of the most valuable aspects of the BYUPA. “One of the greatest benefits aside from a new perspective is just the networking and collegiality that is built among the different schools and districts” (A2).

The safety of a place to discuss their challenges with principals who share them is seen as invaluable. A supervisor with a similar view stressed vulnerability and risks. “The principal’s seat can be pretty vulnerable, and now you have a group of colleagues as thinking partners, which I think is created through that

provided some helpful recommendations for reinforcing, revisiting, or strengthening them while moving forward in implementing the professional learning process.

### **Improved principal practice**

Several supervisors mentioned visible improvements in principal leadership practices among BYUPA participants. For example, “It helps our principals begin to design a system, how we align all of our practices instead of having isolated practices” (A1).

Similarly, “It provides that second go-around that really starts to solidify their learning” (C2). One supervisor summed it this way, “I think it takes their learning to another level because now they’ve had a few years of





practices instead of having isolated practices because that is when you begin to see change” (A1). If the BYUPA and the partner school districts worked together to define desired outcomes and conduct program delivery, the benefits of this two-year professional development program could be magnified.

### **Research Question 3: How might the university and districts effectively partner in selecting participants, encouraging participation, and supporting participants in applying their learning experience?**

#### **Selection**

Selection of BYUPA attendees has varied widely in the participating districts. Principal supervisors make selections in some districts, the district cabinet takes care of this in others, and the superintendent and assistant superintendent make these decisions in others. None of the districts have a formal application process.

#### **Career stages**

While some research suggests differentiated professional development programs for aspiring principals, newly inducted principals, and long-time principals (Wong, 2004), the BYUPA has not targeted their program toward principals at a particular career stage or in particular types of schools.

Thus, participating districts have varied in their views about who should attend. Some districts have limited their selection pool to acting principals, while others have seen some benefit in having their high-potential assistant principals and district office personnel attend. One supervisor explained, “It’s been very interesting to see that they do get something out of it [regardless of their] state.” (D1). Another supervisor specified, “We have allowed

assistant principals who are sharp, who are ready to take the material and contribute” (B2).

A few supervisors were a little more hesitant in sending assistant principals, but felt that attending did build enthusiasm for moving up to a principal position (C1). A supervisor explained his district’s policy, “I think even if you could cognitively know what the duties of a principal are ... until you are actually the principal you just have no idea what your role is ... we’ve only sent principals” (A2).

#### **Objectives and outcomes**

The apparent discrepancy in selection approaches may be partially due to an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the intended learning outcomes of the BYUPA. When asked who should attend, one supervisor brought the discussion back to this situation: “It gets back to that mission and vision. What are the objectives that we’re trying to accomplish?” (C2). Another supervisor was more specific about this need:

[Clear objectives] would help us in our selection process as well, because then we would be able to look for those specific competencies and be able to say,

more effectively address the unique experiences of these leaders in their specific roles, career stages, and circumstances (Stewart, Davenport, & Lufti, 2006).

### **Participation and implementation**

After inviting school leaders to participate in BYUPA, district supervisors have assumed that those invited to attend will participate fully in the academy for the good of their schools. “I think we’re just assuming they’re all there and present and engaged and prepared” (A1). In accordance with adult learning theories, supervisors are hesitant to dictate overly specific expectations that could potentially interfere with adults’ rich, self-directed learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

Previous research in this area would suggest that principals appreciate this low-

This sentiment was supported by another supervisor, “There should be some type of collective commitment ... to determine what the actionable step is ... based on what your school needs are” (A1).

Another participant stressed that applying what they learn at Principals Academy is not a matter of *whether* the principal is going to make changes; it's a matter of choosing *which* applications will be most suitable for the individual school:

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Admittedly, a lack of clearly stated learning outcomes makes it challenging to evaluate BYUPA's effectiveness. Each of the forms of feedback and evaluation referred to in this section rely primarily on supervisors' fuzzy perception that leadership has improved in ways that better support student learning. There seems to be a lack of clear, valid, reliable, and objective measures that would establish program effectiveness.

As one supervisor noted in discussing effective program evaluation: "It's all about the BYUPA outcomes. Coming back to your objectives" (C2). Establishing clear outcomes will allow program facilitators and partnership districts to co-design relevant measures of program effectiveness that will allow for continual program evaluation and improvement.

## Conclusion

Principal supervisors see the BYUPA as a positive way for participants to network, reflect, rejuvenate, and increase in leadership capacity. They noted improvements evident in these principals' practice. Participants seem to benefit regardless of district, position, or career stage. But as one supervisor posited, "I just think there is greater potential that we have not yet tapped into" (A1).

Based on feedback from the supervisor focus group, one of the best ways to tap into that latent potential, would be for the university and districts to co-develop essential learning outcomes for BYUPA that align specifically with districts' needs. This co-development of outcomes would likely result in a healthy

balance of the theoretical from the university and practical from the districts.

Knowing these intended outcomes will allow principal supervisors to better select participants who will benefit in terms of those outcomes, nurture participants' growth while they are in the program, and facilitate implementation of program learning. Not only will this tighter program coordination improve communication between the university and districts, supervisors believe that it will contribute to greater capacity in individual participants and improve learning for students in the schools.

### **Author Biographies**

Pamela Hallam is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Educational Leadership and Foundations Department at Brigham Young University.



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