UC EA University Council for Educational Administration

When the Leader Leaves: Sustaining Success at Romero High School

Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership
15(3) 47–55

DOI: 10.1177/1555458912447847
http://jcel.sagepub.com
SAGE

Lauri Johnson[1] and Kathryn Sillman[1]

Abstract

This case study asks readers to consider what leadership actions might help to sustain success for immigrant students in a small urban high school when the leader leaves. Principal Michael Perez, the founding principal of Romero High School, has been recruited to become the superintendent of a first-ring suburban district with rapidly changing demographics. Describing himself as a hands-on "humanistic" leader, Perez established innovative curriculum and organizational structures at Romero High School to meet the language learning needs of the school's teenage immigrant students. His impending departure requires Principal Perez, school district leaders, and his successor to determine what knowledge and skills are needed to sustain school improvements and navigate the leadership succession process.

Keywords

sustaining school improvement, leadership succession, immigrant students

Introduction

> Principals stand on the shoulders of those who went before them and lay the foundation for those who will follow.
>
> —Hargreaves and Fink (2003)

Sustaining school improvement is a common problem in low-income North American school districts where a high turnover in staff, particularly principal mobility, occurs for a variety of reasons, including the impending retirements of baby boomer educators,

[1]Boston College, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Lauri Johnson, Associate Professor, 205C Campion Hall, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA
Email: lauri.johnson@bc.edu

the district rotation of principals (Fink & Brayman, 2006), and the mandatory removal of school leaders from failing schools under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Increasingly, principals who have proved successful in "challenging" schools also depart when they are promoted to district-level leadership or tapped to turn around other struggling schools. For example, in our original study of seven ISSPP (International Successful School Principalship Project) schools in Western New York, after 5 years, only one of the principals remained as a successful leader in her original school (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2009). Navigating this succession in leadership is important for the incoming and outgoing principals, for the school district leaders who make staffing decisions, and to sustain school improvement efforts in urban schools.

In the following case study, a Latino school leader (Principal Michael Perez) announces at the end of the school year that he is leaving Romero High School, the small urban public high school for immigrant teens he founded, to become the superintendent of a first-ring suburban district with rapidly changing demographics. Perez's leadership is first analyzed through the framework used by the original U.S. ISSPP case studies (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2005), which identifies the core leadership skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contend are necessary for success (i.e., setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program). The case narrative is followed by an activity designed for students in principal preparation courses in which they must develop an exit strategy for Perez, a hiring plan for the district leadership, and an entry plan for Perez's successor that operationalizes the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate change and maintain success for immigrant students when the leader moves on.

Case Narrative

"Hey, Manny, I'll check you out in the gym after school. Are you ready for me?" It's 7:15 a.m. on a gray New England morning as Principal Perez greets Manny Jimenez with a broad smile and a "soul brother handshake" in the entryway of this recently renovated 1950's brick school building.

At 17, Manny emigrated from the Dominican Republic to find work and pursue his high school education. He currently lives with his aunt and her four children in a working class neighborhood an hour away from Romero High School by subway. With a reputation as the "toughest kid in the school," Principal Perez has challenged Manny to a weight-lifting contest. If the principal wins, Manny has agreed to wear a tie, become the principal's mentee, and take on more responsibility at school. If Manny wins the contest, he will be able to play on the school's baseball team despite his poor grades. The next day, after the principal "kicked his butt" in the weight room, Manny shows up wearing a tie to school, and Principal Perez has agreed to provide him new leadership opportunities as well as a chance to play on the baseball team.

Romero High School is a small school (225 students) in a northeastern city that serves recent immigrant teenagers from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa. Although a majority of the students are Latino and Spanish speaking

(67%), more than 42 different countries are represented in the school. This program was initially established as a temporary transitional English as a Second Language program until students developed enough English language skills to enroll in their local public high school. When Principal Perez was hired, he applied for funding from the Gates Foundation to develop Romero High School into a small theme-based high school.

According to Perez, there was little support from the school district to create an international high school for English Language Learners.

> It was a transitional ESL (English as a Second Language) program they were going to shut down. When I said I wanted to create a school the current superintendent said "All right, give it a shot if you really want to try it."

English Language Learners in this district had previously been grouped in small self-contained programs throughout the city based on their home language (i.e., all the Cape Verdean students were placed in one school, the Spanish-speaking students in another, and the students who spoke Haitian Creole in a third school). The creation of Romero High School provided a "safe space" and academic peer culture for English Language Learners to develop proficiency in English within the context of a college preparatory curriculum and a multicultural student body.

Setting Directions

Perez's vision for Romero High School included the development of academic language skills, high standards for academic achievement, a focus on service learning, and a shared sense of responsibility among the students. Over the last 7 years, groups of students have participated in faculty-run service trips to Washington, D.C., and New York, as well as internationally to St. Croix, the Dominican Republic, and Ghana. Raising funds for these trips and planning the agenda and itinerary have been incorporated into the school curriculum as part of their project-based learning.

Recognizing that "this vision was not shared by all," particularly the teachers he "inherited" from the original transitional English as a Second Language program, Perez made hiring new teachers one of his first priorities. Teacher turnover was initially high, however, including 1 year in which about 30% of the staff left—both voluntarily and nonvoluntarily. Perez described that particular year's turnover in this way:

> There were some teachers who graduated from Yale, Harvard . . . They had great credentials and could write an incredible curriculum but then, at the end of the day, they couldn't say, "I've made a mistake." You want people who can admit they can make mistakes.

Learning from this experience, Perez sought out teachers with a sense of empathy for language learners and a reflective attitude toward their teaching. As the son of an immigrant family from the Dominican Republic, Principal Perez attended a local

bilingual public school and closely identifies with the challenges his students face as adolescent immigrants. In his words, "I know these students because I was one of them." It is the principal's energy, commitment, and optimism about the capabilities of immigrant students that characterize his leadership approach. According to one veteran teacher in the school, "Michael Perez is passionate about helping this population of kids who have not traditionally been given a lot of academic support." In the words of another teacher,

> Perez has his own ideas, but he is so committed that we said (as a faculty), even if this guy is wrong, he is working so hard that he is going to make it right. So let him work. And the students seem to respond to that commitment.

Perez's mantra, "Every Student, Every Day, Every Class, Quality Instruction," has been taken up by the current teachers in the school who are mostly bilingual (i.e., Spanish, Russian, Cape Verde Creole, and Albanian) and immigrants themselves. While Romero High School teachers describe Perez as the "provider and protector" of the school, he has established an inner circle that includes the assistant principal, the guidance counselor, and the school secretary. An atmosphere of "critical care" (Anthrop-Gonzales & De Jesus, 2006) is evident where students are held to high expectations (many go on to attend college) yet are also provided the emotional and academic supports needed to achieve success. The school secretary sums up the staff's approach—"We make it happen. Whatever it takes."

Redesigning the Organization

To meet a range of language learning needs, Perez restructured the school into a multiage "house" system that enables teachers to group students by ability rather than age or standard grade level. Each house contains its own set of literacy, math, science, and social studies teachers. With three "houses" to choose from, each Romero High School student can take courses by ability level rather than age. As Perez explains, "Every teacher has a content area specialization and is also a language teacher." While teachers focus on mastering subject matter content in their classes, project-based learning encourages interdisciplinary and individualized learning across subject areas.

Student movement between houses usually happens at the end of an academic year, but individualized assessment allows a student who is strong in mathematics but emergent in English to take math classes in House 2 and literacy classes in House 1. By the time students enter House 3, they receive university credit through classes offered on-site by local college instructors.

Last year, Romero High School implemented an Opportunity to Learn (OTL) program to provide extra support and instructional time to struggling students after school, on Saturdays, and during school vacations. While some students are mandated by their "house" teachers to attend the program, other students attend voluntarily to improve their grades. Principal Perez makes a point to participate in the Saturday classes every week.

Developing People

Described as an instructional leader by many of his teachers, Principal Perez spends every Tuesday observing in each teacher's classroom, constantly scripting the lessons on his "yellow pad," and conferencing afterward about their ongoing improvements in practice. As one of the teachers termed it, "Perez teaches you how to teach."

Teachers meet as a "house" twice a week to talk about students and scheduling, and to discuss the essential learnings they expect the students to master at each level. This school year, at the principal's urging, Romero High School teachers began regular classroom visitations to observe each other's teaching. Perez regularly attends the district's professional workshops with his teachers as well.

Definitions of Success

Compared with other schools in the district with high immigrant populations, Romero High School has made continuous improvement on statewide assessments since it opened in 2004, particularly in Mathematics. However, many of the school staff emphasize goals for students that do not rely solely on standardized test scores. As one of the teachers put it, "For me the most important thing is for the students who are working hard to feel successful." Led by Perez, as part of the school's OTL focus, the staff dropped letter grades and rewrote the grading policy to assess students through a rubric that includes three levels: exceeds expectations, meets expectations, and needs more time. A fourth grading category was added termed "needs more responsibility" for those students who the staff felt were not applying themselves.

These student-centered organizational and instructional changes have encouraged a broader view of student achievement at Romero High School than merely high performance on standardized tests. According to school insiders, Principal Perez has been successful in buffering the teachers at Romero High School from district accountability pressures.

The Departure

By March, rumors were flying that Perez was being considered for the superintendent position in a nearby suburban district, but the school board decision was not made until early May with little time left in the school year to discuss the change in leadership at Romero High School with the staff. Principal Perez approached the assistant principal to apply for the principalship of Romero High School, but he indicated he was not interested in dealing with "district politics." By mid-May, Perez was increasingly pulled out of the building to attend planning meetings in his new district. Although the teachers at Romero High School acknowledge they have contributed to the school's growth and success, in the end, they attribute much of the direction setting and curricular innovations to Perez, the founding principal. They describe his impending departure as leaving a "tremendous void," and wonder aloud, "How can anyone manage to fill his shoes?" With the growing trend to close smaller schools in the district and rent their buildings to new charter schools, Romero High School

faculty worry that their small school might be incorporated as a program in another large high school in the district. What will happen to Romero High School when Principal Perez leaves?

Teaching Notes and Activity

In this case, Principal Michael Perez, the founding principal of a small urban school for immigrant students (Romero High School), has been recruited to become the superintendent of a nearby first-ring suburban district with changing demographics. Perez's rapid departure at the end of the school year, although not unusual in high poverty urban districts with a high rate of leadership turnover, raises questions about how the school improvements he initiated might be sustained and complicates the leadership succession process at Romero High School.

As Sarason (1972) noted 40 years ago, the first challenge for an innovative school is when the founding principal leaves. Often, new schools reflect the founding principal's advocacy and vision, and leaders may underestimate the capacity needed to sustain school improvements on their departure. In addition, as an innovative school matures or faces new external constraints, different leadership approaches may be needed.

In their study of innovative schools over time, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) found that failure to pay attention to succession planning meant that the charisma of the founding principal was difficult to replace. Efforts to sustain school success depend on understanding and managing these changes in leadership over time, and on both the incoming and outgoing leader's abilities to ascertain what is needed to move the school forward.

Drawing on Wenger's (1998) work, Hargreaves (2005) found that leaders use three kinds of knowledge during the succession process:

> *Inbound knowledge* is leadership knowledge needed to make one's mark on a particular school or turn it around. *Insider knowledge* to improve schools is gained after becoming known, trusted, and accepted within the community. *Outbound knowledge* is what is needed to preserve past successes, keep improvement going, and leave a legacy. (p. 169)

Research on leadership succession has documented the important role of trust (Macmillan, Meyer, & Northfield, 2004) and capacity building to maintain innovations on the leader's departure. Other knowledge that the incoming and outgoing principals need to sustain school improvements, particularly in schools with a culturally diverse staff and student population, has received less attention.

Small Group Discussion Activity

This small group activity might be used in principal preparation courses to help students explore the leadership succession issues involved in this case. The following

discussion questions are designed to elicit the "outbound," "inbound," and "insider" knowledge that might help sustain school improvement and facilitate leadership succession at Romero High School.

In this activity, the class is divided into three small groups, with each group taking one of three leadership perspectives regarding Romero High School: (a) the outgoing principal (Perez), (b) the district leader/s responsible for hiring, and (c) the incoming principal. As this case study is intended as an exemplar for effective leadership succession, students should feel free to offer their advice about what these actors *should* have done before, during, and after the founding principal leaves. After discussion, each small group will report out the plans they have developed to the whole group.

Discussion Questions Handout

Group 1: Principal Perez's exit plan (outbound knowledge). Imagine you are Michael Perez and describe your exit strategy as you prepare to leave the school. Use the following questions to guide your thinking, but you may also include other "outbound knowledge" that you think will help to preserve your legacy. Be prepared to present your plan to the whole class.

1. What series of actions would you implement with the faculty, students, and parents at Romero High School before you leave the school that might help to sustain the school's success?
2. What information about the school would you document for the incoming principal? (i.e., What would you want this new leader to know about the school, the students, and the teachers?)
3. What advice would you give the new principal about making changes in the school?

Group 2: District leaders' plan (inbound knowledge). Imagine you are the district leader/s responsible for staffing Romero High School. Describe your plan for the leadership change at Romero High School, using the following questions to guide your thinking about the "inbound" knowledge that the new leader needs to be effective:

1. From a district perspective, what issues would you want the new leader of Romero High School to address?
2. What knowledge do you think the new principal would need about Romero High School?
3. What changes should the new principal make at Romero High School? How would he or she make those decisions?

Group 3: New principal's entry plan (insider knowledge). Imagine you are the new principal of Romero High School and use the following questions to guide your entry plan to develop the "insider knowledge" that will help you to be an effective leader:

1. What information about the school and the staff would you want to know before you assumed leadership and during your 1st year at the school? How would you go about acquiring that information?
2. What organizational structures and curriculum innovations described in this case study would you choose to maintain in the school? How would you make those decisions?
3. How might your entry plan be different if Romero High School had not been successful with English Language learners?

Follow-Up Activity: Leadership Succession Timelines

As a follow-up activity, each small group can illustrate a timeline of key incidents in the succession process at Romero High School from their particular leadership perspective. Students can share timelines with the whole group as a way to identify possible conflicts in the way each leader approaches the leadership succession process.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Anthrop-Gonzales, R., & De Jesus, A. (2006). Toward a theory of critical care in urban small school reform: Examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino community-based schools. *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *19*, 409-433.

Fink, D., & Brayman, C. (2006). School leadership succession and the challenges of change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *42*, 62-89.

Giles, C., & Hargreaves, A. (2006). The sustainability of innovative schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities during standardized reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *42*, 124-156.

Hargreaves, A. (2005). Leadership succession. *Educational Forum*, *69*, 163-173.

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2003). Sustaining leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *84*, 693-700.

Jacobson, S., Johnson, L., Ylimaki, R., & Giles, C. (2005). Successful leadership in challenging U.S. schools: Enabling principles, enabling schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *43*, 607-618.

Jacobson, S., Johnson, L., Ylimaki, R., & Giles, C. (2009). Sustaining success in an American school: A case for governance change. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *47*, 753-764.

Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2005). What do we already know about educational leadership? In W. Firestone & C. Riehl (Eds.), *A new agenda for research in educational leadership* (pp. 12-27). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Macmillan, R. B., Meyer, M. J., & Northfield, S. (2004). Trust and its role in principal succession: A preliminary examination of a continuum of trust. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *3*, 275-294.

Sarason, S. (1972). *The creation of settings and the future societies*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bios

Lauri Johnson is an associate professor at Boston College where she teaches leadership courses with an equity and social justice focus and is the program coordinator of the educational leadership area. Her research interests include national and international studies of multicultural policy, community activism in urban school reform, and culturally responsive leadership.

Kathryn Sillman is a PhD student in curriculum and instruction at Boston College where she worked as a research assistant on the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). She has a background in curriculum development and teacher education.