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THE ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN PUERTO RICO

Executive Summary

During 2019, ABRE decided to further its investigative work through the publication of the research study “Education Gap Analysis: Case Study Approach”. In this study, ABRE PR sought to detect enabling factors for academic performance, by looking at geographically proximate schools with similar student profiles but different academic outcomes. ABRE PR selected and analyzed 14 schools, resulting in valuable findings and some additional research questions that deserved further investigation. One of the key findings from this research was that school principals were critical drivers of overall school performance, particularly when operate their schools with a high degree of autonomy and they are proactive. This demonstrated a large need for more research on the role of the school principal.

Based on these previous findings and to discover ways to support school principal’s daily tasks and responsibilities, this new ABRE PR research focused on the following question: **What are the organizational needs affecting the general well-being of public-school principals in Puerto Rico?** By investigating the current organizational needs of public-school principals in Puerto Rico, ABRE PR’s research aims to help set some guidelines to ensure that future investments in these areas perform according to local needs and respond to sound policy interventions.

The expected results from this investigation were the following:



Discover the common and existing organizational needs among Puerto Rico public school principals that neither the Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE) nor other stakeholders cover



Expose currently available resources and their suitability or effectiveness for school principals’ organizational needs



Develop recommendations that could be used to create an action plan that determines the areas that NGOs and/or the PRDE need to invest in



Propose public policy changes or investment programs to cover common and specific organizational needs.

Executive Summary (cont.)

Method

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a questionnaire titled “Organizational Needs Questionnaire” was designed to develop a profile of the organizational needs of public-school principals. This needs questionnaire aimed to collect and identify the diverse needs that both schools and their principals have that could be affecting the quality of their performance and well-being. In addition to this questionnaire, semi-structured questions were designed for interviewing 21 school principals. The interview consisted of 8 questions to gather information about the following: (1) the most pressing needs of schools; (2) assistance and benefits received from non-profit organizations, private partnerships, and/or other institutions; (3) level of parental and community engagement; (4) administrative needs and duties concerning the improvement of schools’ performance; (5) aspects necessary for schools to achieve success; (6) budget needed to cover needs; and (7) perceptions on the competencies or skills a school principal requires to be successful in their role.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and not having in-person access to schools in operation and during regular hours, the official data collection was done using multiple platforms and services such as, emails, telephones, PsyData, and Zoom.

Findings

This study managed to confirm that school principals believe they are severely lacking in basic resources and materials to provide a healthy environment for teachers and students and improve academic achievement. Principals were in need of concrete organizational resources such as materials, personnel, and technology, among others. ABREPR findings reflect the poor conditions of these schools in the areas of infrastructure, technology, personnel, and sports facilities.

As a result, principals spend more time covering all their essential needs to operate in a safe environment and have less time to work on the academic improvement of the schools they manage. This context amplifies the possibility for school principals to develop some type of burnout, which could end up affecting their personal comfort and health but also the well-being of their schools.

The school principals surveyed and interviewed for this study also demanded greater autonomy in the areas of administration, finances, and recruitment of personnel (for teaching and non-teaching staff). Principals complained about type of training teachers received and about the PRDE practice of transferring teachers without consulting them. There also seems to be a general agreement that the procurement processes to get materials and resources to cover their different needs are ineffective.

These might be one of the explanations of why most principals must develop creative, different, and informal responses to fulfill the different needs their schools have. One common thread found through the collected data is that principals feel they cannot influence the decision-making processes of their region or the PRDE central offices regarding their schools. This lack of autonomy leads them to create various options and design coping mechanisms for them to meet these needs. In addition to feeling they have little autonomy to make significant changes, school principals felt they are not being paid adequately or fairly, as their salaries do not compensate for all the work they do; salaries have not increased in proportion with their ever-growing workload.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, ABREPR recommends that principals should have the ability to make decisions regarding administrative and financial matters, including hiring processes of both teaching and non-teaching staff. ABREPR also encourages the creation of a vice-principal position or a school administrator, which focuses on addressing administrative management matters to deal with the great number of tasks that every school principal must currently manage. In addition, ABREPR suggests conducting a job analysis to evaluate school principals' scale salaries, responsibilities, and necessary competencies for the job.

Finally, notwithstanding all these challenges, proactive school principals, who are also effective instructional leaders, have created or allow the create imaginative mechanisms to meet the various needs of their school. Some of the initiatives and processes that principals have put in place could help others with their specific needs. Using various platforms, school principals should be able to promote and communicate strategies and best practices for other principals to emulate; this will create effective learning communities between schools. In ABRE PR's interviews, principals showed willingness to share and teach others what they do every day to meet their many challenges. Having resources available for principals to share their experiences will promote collaboration throughout schools, resulting in the implementation of efficient instructional strategies and promotion of effective learning. On this specific study ABRE focused on organizational needs of school principals.

Additional research is required to analyze the health and competency needs of public-school principals on the island. This additional research could provide great insights concerning the necessary health factors that must be taken care of for the well-being of Puerto Rico's public-school principals. As well, creating the ideal school principal profile will enable the identification of the necessary competencies and skills public school principals in Puerto Rico require to achieve the expected success in terms of academic performance and quality education.