PRINCIPAL SUCCESSION IN HIGH SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Education Program
California State University Channel Islands

In (Partial) Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts

by
James Anthony Martinez

May 2007
APPROVED FOR THE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Joan M. Karp  May 21, 2007
Dr. Joan M. Karp  Date

Jeanne M. Grier  May 21, 2007
Dr. Jeanne M. Grier  Date

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Gary A. Berg  5-22-07
Dr. Gary A. Berg  Date
Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my wife, Elizabeth, for her tremendous support during the writing of this thesis, as well as my children, Sierra and Rio. Secondly, this research project could not have been accomplished without the expert advice of my thesis advisor, Dr. Jeanne Grier, who guided me with great care throughout the entire preparation. Additionally, I am indebted to Dr. Conrad (Tim) Rummel, Director of the Principals Leadership Program, for his consistently expressed faith in my future as an educational administrator. Finally, I want to thank the excellent course professors at the California State University at Channel Islands for imparting their knowledge and sage advice throughout the Masters of Arts in Education Program.
Table of Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................................. 6
Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 7
Review of Literature .......................................................................................................................... 9
Method............................................................................................................................................. 14
Results.............................................................................................................................................. 22
Discussion and Conclusions ............................................................................................................ 33
References........................................................................................................................................ 39
Appendix A: Principal Questionnaire (n = 6).................................................................................. 41
Appendix B: Interview Questions.................................................................................................... 42
Abstract

Incoming secondary level administrators in the public schools who serve high socioeconomic status (SES) students and their families face real challenges every day. Six experienced, southern California high school principals who serve these students were surveyed to assess their opinions related to succession, their role in the broader school community, attitudes of high SES parents which affect their jobs and challenges faced by students and teachers at their schools. These principals were subsequently interviewed to provide a deeper understanding of this topic. The goal of this study was to investigate the perspectives of principals who are leaders at high SES secondary schools regarding factors, strategies and procedures that could assist with a positive leadership transition for the entire school community.
Introduction

Principal succession commonly occurs in today’s educational environment. During the past nine years, this researcher experienced no less than three principal successions in affluent, high socioeconomic status (SES) schools. According to the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL), high socioeconomic status (or high SES) is a term that combines family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community. NCREL states that high SES parents have more access to resources that promote and support their child's development, including having easy access to information about their children's health, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive development. NCREL further states that high SES families also have high-quality childcare, books, and toys to encourage children in various learning activities at home.

The goal of this study was to investigate the perspectives of principals who are leaders at high SES secondary schools regarding factors, strategies and procedures that could assist with a positive leadership transition for the entire school community. Therefore, the research question for this study was the following: Within the first year of an administrative succession at a high socioeconomic status secondary public school, what are the leadership strategies that a principal can use to ensure a smooth transition?

In order to guide this study, a careful review of current research was undertaken. There have been common themes in research over the last fifteen years related to the topic of principal succession. Investigators (Fullan, 2001. Coutts, D., Cochran, J., & Terry, P., 1997. Hart, A., 1991. Hargreaves, A. & Fink, D., 2003) agree that principals assuming responsibilities at a new post face significant challenges in adapting to their new positions. These challenges include, but are not limited to, effectively communicating with various members of the school community,

Witnessing work-related incidents experienced by principals during transition periods led this researcher to see that certain leadership strategies might significantly affect the success of an incoming principal at a high SES school. In his/her first year, a new principal must comply with basic administrative duties, but also perform due diligence with regard to communication/listening skills, respect previously established site policies or educational programs, and establish a secure connection early with the school and its community by carefully involving parents, teachers, local business leaders and others in key decision making roles at the school. If these strategies can be discovered and presented in a straightforward and defined way, then incoming principals using them can increase the likelihood of a smooth leadership transition. The topic is also of interest to teachers at high SES schools because if they understand what practices help incoming principals adjust to their new environments with greater ease, these teachers can assist their new leaders to transition more effectively. Lastly, transitioning principals should be made aware of specific leadership strategies that apply specifically to high SES schools, but may not be necessary at middle or low SES settings.
Educational Administrative Succession 9

Review of Literature

*General Principals*

Educational researchers (Fullan, 2002. Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) concur that there are commonly agreed upon principles that every successful principal should follow in their leadership roles. Fullan (2002) encourages principals assuming leadership at a new school to think beyond their primary role as instructional leaders. He advises them to think of themselves as “cultural change” leaders, cultivating learning for students, faculty, and staff with moral purpose, an understanding of the change process, and the ability to improve relationships, knowledge creation, sharing, and “coherence making.” Fullan (2002) emphasizes long-term sustainability and learning in context for new principals.

Noonan and Goldman (1995) interviewed twelve elementary school principals, one hundred and fifty teachers, and two district superintendents over a twelve-month period. Noonan and Goldman recognize the importance of principals in the educational environment as curricular leaders, and more importantly, as orchestrators of faculty (with regard to hiring decisions and placement). They took note of faculty/staff perceptions of personal relationships following an administrative succession and emphasize a “window of opportunity” when district personnel can effectively place a new principal in a school setting with minimal controversy.

Coutts, Cochran and Terry (1997) advocate the use of a survey to evaluate administrative successors. The survey, called the Effective Schools Climate Inventory (ESCI), should be given to faculty and staff in October and January in the school year after an administrative succession. The ESCI can be given to elementary, middle, or high school personnel to determine how a new principal’s efforts are aligned with those of his faculty/staff. Coutts, Cochran, and Terry state that it is not uncommon to find that there are no statistical differences between an incoming
principal’s survey results and those from his faculty/staff using this measure. In one of their own assessments, however, only the incoming principal recognized five of the seventeen key issues stated by teachers.

Fitting in With Parents

Assuming a new leadership position in a high SES school, there are many considerations that are inherent to that role due to the unique qualities of these communities (Kohn, 1998. Lambert, 2003). Alfie Kohn (1998) reported that affluent, high SES parents erode important and necessary educational reform by pressuring principals to maintain the “status quo” in their schools. According to Kohn, these parents tended to be highly competitive individuals who put excessive pressure on their children to excel academically. They also blocked efforts for school reform because innovative practices may adversely impact their child’s academic average.

Lambert (2003) promoted many effective strategies that a principal can use to better utilize a high SES parent group within the school. Among them are: 1) stating explicitly the school’s high expectations for parent involvement, 2) making as many parents as possible an active part of the shared vision of the school, 3) providing parent information on how to assist their children with their schoolwork at home, 4) giving parents the opportunity to voice their opinion(s) about difficult school issues, 5) keeping parent participation broad-based in leadership/decision-making groups, 6) providing information to parents that they can use to assess their own leadership skills to effectively apply them in school activities.

Important Traits and Strategies

Hargreaves and Fink (2003) defined important goals for principals to focus on in the first years of succession. In their opinion, principals should: 1) create and preserve sustained learning, 2) secure success over time, 3) sustain leadership concepts and programs through building the
leadership capacity of others on the staff, 4) address issues of social justice. 5) develop (not deteriorate) human/material resources and 6) develop environmental diversity and capacity. 

*Feeling Comfortable in their Roles*

In *Leader Succession and Socialization*, researcher Hart (1991) states that the accommodation time for an incoming principal can range from three months to five years. Hart states that during the first year a principal acclimates to their new position, there is an inherent pressure to not make changes, as new principals take on “custodial” roles at their schools. How similar the principal’s educational emphases are with those of the school community make a difference in acclimatization time. Hart feels that efforts principals make to clearly communicate their expectations must be legitimate for the principal to succeed. In addition, social class differences between the principal and the school community can further complicate the issue. Hart recommends that principals assigned to new positions should develop long-range educational strategies and “stick with them” to be more successful in their transitions.

Robert B. McMillan (1993) interviewed five Canadian secondary school principals for his article, *Approaches to Leadership Succession: What Comes with Experience?* He states that the amount of administrative experience an incoming principal brings to his/her school is a significant factor that helps to determine effectiveness principal succession. The more experience, in McMillan’s view, the less risks a principal takes, many times leaving the task of implementing necessary changes to vice-principals. On the other hand, more experienced principals transitioning into a new setting are better informed by previous experience. In essence, there is a balance between inexperienced principals willing to try new ideas (many of which have foundations in current educational research) with more tenured administrators acting on years of practical experience. McMillan feels that regardless of experience, “creative tension” is
necessary in any educational environment to foster positive change. He encourages inexperienced principals in new educational settings to say, “I’m sorry, there is no way that I can support that (p.15)” to unreasonable requests from faculty and parents.

*High SES/Low SES Student Advantages/Disadvantages*

In Kohn’s view, high SES parents do not support heterogeneous student groupings, instead they advocate ability-based groups stratifying the educational environment by separating the “have’s” from the “have nots”. Kohn feels these parents are “sacrificing other children to their own” by promoting these practices. In addition, affluent high SES parent groups campaign for increased use of worksheets and standardized testing, student rankings, and letter grades (as opposed to standards-based evaluations). Unfortunately, according to Kohn, students from high SES families often over-emphasize the value of classroom learning as a contribution to future academic goals, by looking at the majority of their educational experiences as contributors to what comes ahead, and never learning “in the moment.”

*Theoretical Framework*

Although a number of studies (Noonan & Goldman, 1997. Coutts, Cochran & Terry, 1997. Fullan, 2002) are inconclusive when examining the overall effect of a new principal in an established school community, other studies were found that provided concrete steps to help principals in succession (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003. Jones & Webber 2001. Lambert, 2002). These ideas, ranging from focusing on long-term goals to building the leadership capacity of teachers, are avenues to help guarantee positive principal successions. At a high SES school, however, strategies that address the specific needs of these students and their families require additional consideration. For example, one theory (Kohn, 1998) applied to this study stated that parents in affluent schools have a significant affect on learning attitudes and curricular structures
of these schools. It is argued that these parents tend to resist healthy changes if these changes are perceived to affect their child’s individual academic status in any way.

Summary

In summary, research over the last fifteen years has shown that principals assuming new leadership positions need to be cognizant of a wide variety of factors that can affect their performance as administrators at their sites. Principals new to their school sites need to be attentive to: 1) administrative presence and communication, 2) school history, 3) established programs, 4) faculty/staff concerns, 5) parent values and advocacy, 6) the alignment of the principal’s personal values to that established previously at the school, and 7) the effective use of school surveys. In addition, incoming principals at high SES schools serve a unique group of students and parents whose particular needs require additional attention. Investigating specific leadership strategies that a principal can use to ensure a smooth transition at a high SES school became the basis for this study’s questionnaire, interview questions, and research methodology.
Method

In order to determine what strategies are most effective for principals who are transitioning into administrative roles in high SES schools, a specific method of research was undertaken. Participant responses to a questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively to produce specific interview questions used later in the study. Answers to interview questions were analyzed qualitatively to find common responses and themes related to administrative succession at high SES schools.

Setting

The research was conducted in a suburban residential city near Los Angeles, California, and focused on five schools serving students from grades 7-12 from one unified school district. For confidentiality, all school names and the school district name in the study were changed to pseudonyms. The pseudonyms used were Midland High School, Northlake High School, John F. Kennedy High School, Upland Middle School, Elm School and Highland Unified School District (HUSD). The participants who took part in this study serve students from high SES families. In 2003, the median household income for homes in the HUSD secondary school area was $86,287 (City of Thousand Oaks Internet Website, 2007), nearly twice the national average of $44,389 (U.S Census Bureau, 2007). In general, parental involvement at these schools is relatively high, with many parents serving as volunteers and/or committee members.

At the time of the study, all schools had met their statewide, standardized testing goals as required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act since its authorization in 2001. A summary of the Academic Performance Index (API) scores for all schools in the study is provided in Table 1.
Table 1: Hillside Unified School District Secondary Schools (n=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>2006 Academic Performance Index (API)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midland High School</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northlake High School</td>
<td>837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F. Kennedy High School</td>
<td>841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upland Middle School (Grades 6-8)</td>
<td>876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elm School (Grades 6-8 only)</td>
<td>931</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: California Department of Education API LEA Website (http://api.cde.gov/AcntRpt2007/2006BaseSch.aspx)

Participants

Five of the six administrators participating in this study were serving as principals when responding to the study questionnaire and answering questions for the personal interviews. The exception, Mr. Oscar Doster, had completed his tenure as a principal the previous spring to take on an administrative role at the school district office. All participants in this study began their careers in education as teachers, having served in the classroom between five and twenty-six years. The three women and three men, whose age range was between forty-seven and sixty years old, gained a majority of their administrative experiences in public school settings. Although the participants’ ages fell within a narrow margin of thirteen years, the ranges of teaching and administrative experience for the group were larger, twenty-one years and eighteen years, respectively. All had completed the requisite coursework in California for their master’s degrees (two continuing on to earn doctoral degrees) and administrative services credentials to serve as secondary school administrators.

The six study participants previously held teaching and administrative positions in suburban/urban schools, similar to those they currently serve. Like the school district and individual schools, study participant names were changed into pseudonyms, which were Mr.
Mr. Oscar Doster, currently the Director of Secondary Instruction at the HUSD, served as principal of Midland High School for ten years. Due to his successful tenure as a principal, he was promoted to the district office position at the end of the last school year. Mr. Doster was sixty years old and was a holder of a single-subject teaching credential in Physical Education and History. After five years experience as a classroom teacher, Mr. Doster entered administration where he has served in that capacity for the last twenty-five years. During his tenure, he has had experience serving students and families from a full range of the socioeconomic strata.

At forty-seven years old, Dr. Alice Spanning, principal of Elm School, was the youngest of the participants in this study. As well as her Doctorate in Education, she was a holder of a multiple-subject (elementary) teaching credential, a handicapped certificate and a learning specialist credential. After serving for seven years as a classroom teacher and as the Director of Education at a local psychiatric hospital, she began her administrative career that, to this point, has spanned nineteen years. Dr. Spanning was selected as the administrator for the Elm School prior to its opening, having been on-site before buildings were constructed. At the time of the study, Elm School was situated in the center of a large, five-year-old, upper-class housing development, and was serving a majority of its households that had school-age children. When asked about her youth, Dr. Spanning responded by saying that she grew up in a middle-class neighborhood.

At the time of the study, fifty-one year old Dr. Sue Rose was the principal at Upland Middle School, and was serving children in grades six through eight. Dr. Rose taught for nineteen years with her single-subject teaching credential in English before becoming a school
 administrator. For fourteen years, Dr. Rose has served as the principal in middle to high SES schools, all in suburban areas within 30 miles of Upland Middle School. When asked what SES background best describes her upbringing, she gave a single word answer, “Poor.”

During this study, fifty-three year old Mrs. Linda Bard was the principal of Midland High School, having taken over as primary administrator after Oscar Doster’s departure at the end of the previous school year. She was a holder of a single-subject credential in English and taught in the classroom for twenty-six years before becoming an administrator. At the time of her participation in this study, Mrs. Bard had served seven years as an administrator in the Hillside Unified School District, having been previously assigned as an assistant principal of athletics in another high school in the district. She grew up in a middle class family in Central California, where she enjoyed school and the activities it offered her.

At the time of this study, the principal of Northlake High School was Mr. John Lancer. After sixteen years of teaching history in high school classrooms, Mr. Lancer has been an administrator for nineteen years, all but the previous few years at the local middle school whose students matriculate into Northlake High. Although raised in a middle to low-income neighborhood, he had served middle to high SES students in urban settings his entire career.

The principal at award-winning John F. Kennedy High School was Mr. Eric Woodard, who was fifty-five years of age at the time of this study. Mr. Woodard used his single-subject teaching credential in science to teach for ten years before serving the previous twenty-one years as a secondary school administrator. He has been at his current position for seven years and, at the time of his interview, was also teaching an advanced placement biology class, having filled in for a non-tenured teacher that he had dismissed earlier in the school year. Mr. Woodard revealed that he grew up in a middle class home, in a large family.
Instruments

Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected for this project through a participant questionnaire and subsequent principal interviews. A participant consent form was drafted to include the focus of the study, the proposed format and description of possible risks. The consent form was mailed to the HUSD Director of Secondary Instruction, encouraging him to forward it to all secondary level principals in the district who might be interested in participating. He complied with this request and included a recommendation of his own to encourage participation.

Six district administrators [four high school principals, one middle school (6th-8th grades) principal and one primary (K-8) principal] filled out the consent form and returned them via intra-district mail. The consent forms were collected and the participants were contacted individually via electronic mail (email), informing them that their participant consent form had been received. This communication also provided a basic timeline for the study, assurances that pseudonyms would be used throughout to protect their identities and that all study materials would be kept in a locked file cabinet.

An application for approval of human subjects as study participants was submitted to the California University at Channel Islands (CSUCI) Institutional Review Board (IRB). After the IRB application approval, an eleven question Likert Scale questionnaire (see Appendix A) was created that assessed the participants’ attitudes related to the SES of the students he/she served. The questionnaire was then sent to the study participants via inter-district mail, providing a two-week deadline for responses.

Using the results of the initial questionnaire, ten interview questions created previously for another study entitled “Principal Succession in High Socioeconomic Schools” (EDPL 615:
Principles of Educational Research, Summer 2006) was adapted to create sixteen new interview questions that would further reveal the participants’ attitudes and beliefs about succession in high SES secondary schools.

All participants in the study were then contacted via email to arrange personal interviews, which were intended to last from thirty to forty-five minutes. Within eight weeks of receiving the initial survey responses, all study participants were individually interviewed in their school offices. As had been arranged, the interviews were recorded with an audiocassette recorder and varied in length from thirty minutes to fifty-five minutes.

*Description of Data Analysis Methods*

The results of the initial questionnaire were first investigated for variability, commonalities and unique responses. Once a tally of responses was made for each Likert scale category, results for each question were inspected individually. For each question, it was determined that one of three cases existed which represented the responses for all respondents. For each question posed, the respondents were either: 1) not neutral (all agreed or disagreed), 2) did not disagree (all were neutral or agreed), or 3) did not agree (all were neutral or disagreed). This analysis was used to modify previously created interview questions in producing sixteen new administrator interview questions that hoped to further reveal their attitudes and beliefs about administrative succession in high SES secondary schools.

After an initial transcription of interview responses was completed, the text was visually inspected while listening to the audio recordings to ensure that there were no errors. Any modifications were made at this time to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. After the specific responses to the interview questions were isolated, a computer matrix of these responses was created so that the responses from each administrator could be easily compared. This matrix
consisted of arranging the “highlighted” answers for each respondent for each of the sixteen questions posed, where specific responses from the administrators were “side by side” for easy review. Along with the initial questionnaire results, use of this matrix was essential in determining correlative patterns and unique responses to the questions related to administrative successions at high SES secondary schools in the HUSD.

Limitations

The study contained a few significant limitations. First, the subjects were limited to secondary principals. This researcher did not include parent, teacher, assistant principal, dean and student input because of the lack of time to obtain the proper permission, administer the surveys and conduct the interviews necessary to obtain a representative and valid sample from these subjects. Secondly, due to time constraints the study did not include observations of the principals performing their administrative duties. Without these observations, the questionnaire and interview process could only report on the principals’ perceptions of what they felt was important and not verify whether they acted on those beliefs in their work.

Due to the small number of participants, the study was inconclusive with regard to certain analyses (e.g. male principal responses versus female principal responses, responses from those with a doctorate versus those without a doctorate, responses from the high school principals versus responses from the K-8/6-8 principals).

Additionally, none of the principals interviewed admitted to personally being raised a high SES family, so the study does not reflect opinions from administrators from a full range of SES backgrounds. Since this researcher is a teacher in a high SES school, bias was a consideration throughout the research process. No doubt this fact affected the objective nature of how the data was obtained and analyzed. Despite these limitations, the study is a valid resource
for administrators serving in high SES schools to the degree that it represents a broad range of perspectives from both male and female principals from different school configurations (grades: kindergarten-8, 6-8, 9-12) whose past teaching and administrative experiences varied widely.
Results

Questionnaire results and interview responses from study participants revealed both common themes that support published research regarding administrators serving high SES students and their families, as well as discrepancies that are in contradiction with this literature. The initial data collected from the participants in the study were responses from the questionnaire. Tabulated results of this questionnaire are provided in Appendix A. The second source of data collected were responses from principal interviews. The questions posed to the participants are provided in Appendix B.

Although there were only six principals in the study, the results are significant in that they represent a majority of the secondary school administrators serving grades 7 through 12 in the HUSD, including all the high school principals. Common themes were: 1) concurrent principal responses, 2) “fitting in” with parents, 3) traits and strategies useful for transitioning administrators, 4) requisite time before “feeling comfortable” at the school, and 5) student advantages/disadvantages at a high SES secondary schools.

Principals Respond Concurrently

In analyzing questionnaire results, it became evident that principals had strong convictions with regard to many topics presented. Seven of the eleven questions in the initial questionnaire revealed no neutral responses. These questions focused on academic and social aspects of student’s lives and professional challenges faced by administrators at high SES schools. HUSD secondary administrators were not neutral (either agreed/disagreed or strongly agreed/disagreed) in their feelings about whether: 1) students from high socioeconomic status families have as many educational or social challenges as those from low socioeconomic families, 2) incoming administrators need to prepare differently to serve at a high socioeconomic
status school than one where there is a more diverse SES student population, 3) members of the faculty at their school regularly feel pressured by high socioeconomic status parents, 4) their schools’ academic and behavioral policies are written with the needs of high socioeconomic status students in mind, and 5) a higher percentage of low SES students are seen in the office regarding to discipline issues relative to students from high SES families.

For example, when asked whether administrators need to prepare differently to serve at a high SES schools than schools with a more diverse SES student population, every respondent agreed. However, all principals disagreed that they had seriously considered the socioeconomic status of their schools before accepting their positions. This was specifically noted in creating one interview question that asked, “In response to the survey statement ‘Incoming administrators need to prepare differently to serve at a high socioeconomic status school than one where there is a more diverse SES student population’, you agreed. However, you did not agree that you seriously considered the socioeconomic status of my school before accepting my administrative position there. What do you know now that you did not know then”? Representative of many responses to this question, Dr. Alice Spanning’s response was:

I didn’t know that I was going to get stabbed in the back by parents so much. I didn’t know that a few squeaky wheels who may have positions in this town could control those at the district as well as they can.

A majority of the responses centered on their inability to fully recognize the additional challenges they would face in serving students and their families at these schools. Two respondents professed that before beginning their current assignments, they believed that “kids are kids” and the job “didn’t seem any different to me.” However, after experiencing some time
in their roles, all expressed awareness that students and their families from high SES backgrounds demand more attention from their teachers and administrative teams.

“Fitting In” with Parents

Results from the questionnaire and interviews showed conclusively that the participants, all of whom regularly communicate with high SES parents, feel additional pressure in responding professionally to high SES parent concerns. Principal Woodard replied by saying:

You’re going to be stepping on a lot of land mines, I would go to a lower socioeconomic status [school] where you don’t have to worry about every parental long letter, you know, three-page letter that you get from these people.

However, interview responses for all participants in this study repeatedly affirmed the importance of clear and prompt communication with high SES parents. Mr. Doster advised, “Call your school site council president, and call your PSA president and get to know your parent leaders. You’ve got to meet with the leaders, all your stakeholders; you’ve got to try to find your different leaders.”

Except one response that was neutral, administrators agreed/strongly agreed to two questions which asked 1) whether administrators felt that “getting along well” with parents was deemed important at the outset of their new positions and 2) whether they felt that parents of the students they served more highly prioritized their children being accepted into “name colleges/universities”. In relation to pressure to being accepted into prestigious colleges, Mr. Doster proposed, “because of the affluence, you know, uh, there’s just other pressures of getting into college, there’s just other things that they have to deal with socially.”

Although establishing a social presence outside the school was deemed important to succeeding as an administrator in a high SES school, the participants in this study expressed reservations about attending social functions in order to ensure objectivity in their professional
roles. Overall, the respondents generally agreed that they had only a limited role in the school’s “social community”, either because of time limitations or as a conscious decision to ensure that they could protect their professional objectivity in making decisions for the school without personal bias. Mr. Lancer offered:

I live in (neighboring city) but I do not attend, there needs to be a separation. I don’t want to put the parent community in an awkward situation, and I don’t want to be in an awkward situation, so I kind of stay away from those booster casino nights.

In fact, the concern of parental influence in high SES schools was evident in participant responses to question that asked, “What high SES parent attitudes, if any, affect your ability to lead your school, and how do you best respond to them”? Most respondents communicated that, although many high SES parents had high academic expectations for their students and the school as a whole, they also felt that their children were “entitled” to exceptions to school rules and policies. However, all participants were appreciative of the hours of volunteer work and financial contributions high SES parents made at their schools. Dr. Sue Rose provided a balanced response in saying,

The positive is that I can pick up that phone and I can ask for what I need from, and I use the PTSA a lot, because they are an incredible resource and a great way to get the things that we need for our school. There are families where one parent works and one parent stays home, whether that’s the female or the male, um, gives us a huge, huge base, which is wonderful. We have hundreds and hundreds of volunteer hours clocked here every year. The other side of that is that, um, you’re under a microscope at all times. Um, there are lots of people,
who, because they have a lot of time on their hands, um, want to tell you how to run the school. There are only two people on this campus really that see all of the pieces, and that’s my assistant principal and me. The downside to high-SES group, is many of them feel entitled, very entitled.

Useful Traits and Strategies

The principals in the study were generous with their suggestions that related to personal traits or strategies an incoming administrator must rely on to successfully serve their first year at a high SES school. With an average of 18 years of experience serving as school administrators, each principal’s responses reflected a wealth of personal experience.

Overall, the respondents suggested that principals must make themselves readily available to all stakeholders of the school, which includes students, parents, faculty and support staff, and community members interested in the school’s progress. In their opinions, a good communicator/listener who is visible and accessible would be an effective administrator who would build strong relationships at high SES schools. Also, administrators who had well-developed organization skills would serve students from high SES families better. Mr. Doster reiterated these qualities in responding:

It’s real important to exhibit caring, nurturing. [Administrators] have to demonstrate organization . . . they have to be good communicators, both, uh, with the kids and with the teachers, now especially high-end parents are going to be expecting more communication through the technology, through email, through the parent corridor, through web-grade, and all that kind of stuff, its just, that’s the expectation now . . . they have to be fair.
In order to elicit practical advice from each participant’s wealth of administrative experience, each was asked, “If you had to give one bit of advice to an administrator who is entering their first year at a high SES school (and having no previous experience at that type of school), what would that advice be?” It was interesting to note that each principal focused on a different aspect of an administrator’s role in his/her response to this question. Mr. Oscar Doster, former principal of Midland High School, responded by advising new principals at high SES schools to get to know their parent groups, while Dr. Alice Spanning of Elm Elementary simply stated, “don’t change anything.”

On the other hand, Dr. Sue Rose, principal at Upland Middle School, recommended “throwing yourself in” to the job, while Ms. Linda Bard, current principal of Midland High School, advised administrators in this position to “never feel pressured to make a decision (on the spot).” Mr. John Lancer of Northlake High School was consistent in his remarks in advocating that incoming administrators at high SES schools ensure they are available to the entire school community, but Mr. Eric Woodard, the site administrator at John F. Kennedy High School warned newcomers to be wary because “you’re going to step on a lot of land mines.”

According to the participants in the study, qualities of effective teachers serving high SES students corresponded closely to those for administrators when working with these students and their families. Respondents believed that proactive communication and the ability to treat high SES students and their parents respectfully and with care were central tenets to successful classroom teaching. Also, interviewees felt that teachers who demonstrated competence by being knowledgeable in their subject matter were highly regarded by high SES students and their families. Principal Lancer emphasized that effective teachers of high SES students need to ground their teaching with effective communication, saying:
Communication, communication, communication. Try to be fair, but at the end of the day we’re going to stay pretty consistent, in who we are and what we’re about. Treating, its treating them respectfully, not crumbling at the threat of an attorney, not, uh, not wishy-washy. Fair, polite, and firm with the parent. Communication and very knowledgeable in their subject matter. You’re accessible to kids. Caring teacher, competent in their subject matter, great communicator.

_Time to “Feel Comfortable”_

After arriving at their schools, the time it took for the principals in the study to “feel comfortable” in their roles as site administrators depended largely upon their individual circumstances with their schools. Related to this point, each principal was asked, “How much earlier (if at all) did you visit the school where you now work prior to the first day of class?” To this question, five of the six responded between four to six weeks. Dr. Alice Spanning of Elm Elementary, however, had the unusual circumstance of being hired as principal of a school that was still in its initial construction. She related that when she was hired, her school “was dirt” until twenty-four weeks later when it opened its doors for its students.

As far as how long it took these respondents to “feel comfortable” as administrators at their schools, the range was extremely large. Ms. Linda Bard had been serving as an administrator in the same school district for a number of years and had been recently appointed to the post of Assistant Principal of Athletics the year prior to her promotion as principal at Midland High School. She stated that her transition took “about twenty minutes”, mostly due to the fact that on her first official day as principal, the school was engaged in a full-scale bomb threat evacuation. On this day, she had to make some very important decisions for the school’s
student body which consisted of twenty-three hundred students and almost two hundred faculty/staff members, all the while working with local enforcement officials and the district office to ensure the safety of all involved. She related the details by stating, “The first day we had the bomb threat and, and my perception was confirmed by several others including one of our counselors who said, you know, it was an absolutely amazing transition. It took twenty minutes.”

In contrast, Dr. Alice Spanning felt that it took her six years after she helped open her school to “feel comfortable” at her site partly due to the fact that her school needed to add grades each year. She related in the interview:

Every time you add three hundred people its like starting over again. I would say, because there isn’t people out there that already trust and know the school and you are adding fifteen new staff members every time, and your eyes are on them and everything else. So we’re at a place where we are not adding three hundred new people, so we’ve got at lease nine hundred out there that believe in us and trust us and have faith in us. So, um, yeah, it takes a while until you build up a reputation out there that people go, “Okay, we believe in that school” and they trust us.

*Perceptions of Low/High SES Student Advantages/Disadvantages*

Although a majority of the students and their families served by the principals in the study were from high SES backgrounds, each of the principals also served low SES students. These principals in the HUSD expressed concern about the educational and social advantages/disadvantages of low SES students attending their schools with a majority of high SES students. For background, one of the initial interview questions asked the principals about
the SES range of students they served in their careers. Three of the six principals had served a full range (low to high SES) and the remaining three had served only in middle to high SES schools. Also, each participant was asked about his/her perceptions of their own socioeconomic status while growing up. To this question, none of the principals interviewed admitted to being from a high SES family, all answering that they were from low to middle SES backgrounds. These two initial questions were investigated in relation to a question asked later in the interviews that asked the principals about the possible advantages/disadvantages students have if attending a school with a large percentage of high SES students. Principal Lancer summed up many perspectives by responding as follows:

The high SES population is more pressured to get into the prestigious universities. [At] a lower socioeconomic school . . . you don’t get that same sense. You don’t get a sense on campus or even a sense in the community that they are headed to college. College is for the privileged few. [Lower SES students] are happy just graduating and going to work right after high school and they might get trained vocationally, so I think that’s good and bad. But it also has added pressure. It has added pressure in a community like this when a kid starts to go sideways or starts to not do well academically or starts to, you know, their grade point starts to, to dip a little bit. Socially, high school kids are confronted with just, what’s out there. It’s a fast paced society. There’s drugs. There’s alcohol. There’s parties on Friday night. There’s a lot of good stuff, and a lot of bad stuff. Internet and their mobility. And I think there’s just a lot of social pressure out there. But I think that’s pretty true of any kid nowadays. I
don’t think that a kid from a lower socioeconomic school in the middle of LA has any different social pressure.

Overall, the principals interviewed reflected on the challenges faced by high SES students, including: 1) excess pressure to be admitted to prestigious colleges/universities by overbearing parents, 2) over-scheduled weekdays and weekends, 3) increased eating disorders for girls, 4) easier access to illicit material over the Internet, and 5) having the financial means to more easily obtain illegal substances like alcohol and drugs.

However, Dr. Sue Rose of Upland Middle School provided reasons why high SES students have advantages, stating:

In many ways they have the resources to be able to enrich and supplement their academic education. The travel I think is probably the biggest factor. There is also an incredible value to the kinds of experiences in learning that a parent can build into travel, even if they do pull their kid out for a week or ten days or two weeks of school.

Addressing the question of whether low SES students are at a disadvantage with a high percentage of high SES students, the respondents overwhelmingly disagreed, stating that the additional resources available to the whole student body because of a high SES student population would be an advantage to these students as well as the availability of academically focused peer role models. Mr. Woodard stated:

It’s the opposite. They do better here. If they were at a lower school, they’ve got no, they have no role models. So they act worse. You see a bunch of kids acting appropriately, then you think, ‘Oh, gosh. I better act like this, too.’
However, Ms. Linda Bard did point out that certain social events at Midland High School (e.g. dances, sporting contests) are not affordable for lower SES students because the ticket prices were too high and lower SES students are sometimes expected to use the Internet at home to complete assignments, which many times is not available to them. She further added that low SES students do not participate on certain athletic teams due to expensive fees and heavy travel schedules.

Socioeconomic behavioral issues in high SES schools were initially addressed in the one survey question, where two-thirds of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed to the statement, “my counselors, co-administrators and I see a higher percentage of low socioeconomic status students in the office regarding to discipline issues than students from high socioeconomic status families.” When the participants were asked in the interviews to explain further, all reiterated their initial responses in the questionnaire. Dr. Sue Rose of Upland Middle School, however, elaborated further by saying that “we certainly see some high SES kids in here, although their brand of getting into trouble is different.” Mr. Woodard had more to say on the subject, stating:

The problem with the high socioeconomic kids is they all pay attention and focus, so you have more problems with their parent than with the kid. In a low socioeconomic school, you have lots of problems with the kids, but none with the parents because they are never around. Well, you could suspend kids for five days at a low socioeconomic school, and okay, no problem, kid goes on. And here, you suspend somebody and the parents are going to be at the door, ‘Why are you suspending my kid?’ So, you’ve got to deal with the parents. The kids behave, yes. But you have to deal with a lot of parental issues. In a low school, the kids don’t behave, but the parents aren’t around.
Discussion and Conclusions

There are a number of connections between the results of this study and educational research related to principal succession and serving the needs of high SES student populations. The four common themes from questionnaire responses and personal interviews were: 1) how to “fit in” with high SES parents, 2) feeling comfortable at their sites, 3) effective traits and strategies during transition and 4) serving low SES student advantages/disadvantages at high SES schools.

From the research, it is expected that administrators serving in high SES schools need to be especially attentive to the parent community they serve (Kohn, 1998). Confirming this statement, all principals in the study agreed that additional sensitivity to high SES parent concerns is very important to achieving success in their jobs. Furthermore, for all principals in the study, communication by and visibility of administrators are key components of successful principal transitions. In their minds, these aspects show concern and caring, and ensure that the principal is present to handle problems as they arise. Moreover, all study participants stated in their interviews that being sensitive to parent concerns is one of the most important professional strategies any incoming principal needs to have to be successful at high SES schools.

Research has also shown that familiarity with a school’s environment helps the transition process. It could be argued that the varied members of the learning communities (students, parents, and local business leaders) in this study expect their principals to play an active role in their communities. Two researchers (Jones & Webber, 2001) even suggest that it may be better to appoint an experienced administrator to a “successful“ school who had been previously involved in the school’s broader community because it will be more likely that he/she will continue previous school practices by maintaining the “status quo”. An administrator who “gets
along” well with the school’s parents, even pursuing personal relationships with them outside of the school day, might spend less energy resolving conflicts with them at school. Interestingly, the responses by all participants in this study are in direct contrast to these assumptions. Every administrator interviewed stressed the importance of reducing or eliminating any social contact with their students’ parents, relating that keeping a “professional distance” is vital to their success as an administrator. Perhaps it is due to the fact that none of the principals in the study came from high SES backgrounds that they more easily can keep this “professional distance”.

In general, the results of the questionnaire and interviews confirm that high SES parents affect the way that administrators act in their role as principal. A high SES parent can be a “double-edged sword” since they can be very supportive of their child’s academic success and provide service and material goods to their schools, but they can also lose objectivity and become demanding to obtain their own personal goals, regardless of the educational needs of the entire school community. The key for an administrator seems to be to listen to all parent concerns, provide them an avenue to engage themselves in the decision making processes at the school site, and be firm to protect the school and the teachers from a parent who wants too much control.

Also, research suggests that incoming principals must also perform due diligence in creating and preserving sustained learning, building the leadership capacity of others on the staff, addressing issues of social justice, and developing environmental diversity and capacity (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Perhaps due to the specific focus on high SES schools in the questionnaire and interviews, very few of the principals in this study focused on the importance of these qualities. It is the opinion of this researcher that since the principals in this study serve at high SES schools, they focus their energies on administrative skills that are specifically
important to their student and parent population (e.g. academic and athletic achievement, staff responsiveness, highly trained teaching staff), but are less active in administrative efforts more apparent in lower SES schools (e.g. social justice, environmental diversity, service programs, research based interventions, vocation education).

Having made this statement, it was interesting to more fully investigate the principal’s responses to questions about whether low SES students are at a disadvantage in high SES schools. The majority of principals interviewed were able to easily determine aspects of high SES school practices that lower SES students could benefit from (e.g. academically focused peers, high quality materials, teachers with advanced training), but only one principal interviewed was able to determine aspects of a high SES school that would not serve lower SES students, and those aspects are not related to academics (i.e. intervention programs), but to extra-curricular expenses. Important research has determined that certain academic constructs at high SES schools, made as a result of parents who do not promote research-based teaching practices (Kohn, 1998) to ensure that their child’s grades could not be affected, undermine important educational reform. As economic diversity is becoming more and more a reality in most public school systems, it would serve administrators at traditionally high SES schools well to redirect some of their energies toward programs that serve a more diverse socioeconomic status student population.

Incoming administrators at high SES secondary schools will face unique challenges from those who serve schools with a more diverse SES student body. Primarily, these administrators need to collaborate more with parents who have higher expectations of all members of the school’s administration, faculty and staff regarding how the school can best serve their children. Since many high SES parents serve their schools in a variety of roles (e.g. office volunteers, campus
supervisors, committee members), they are more aware of the ‘inner workings” of the school and can more significantly influence its academic and extracurricular activities.

It was uniformly communicated by the principals interviewed for this study that, because of their socioeconomic status, many high SES parents believe their child is “entitled” to exceptions to school policies and procedures, unique circumstances notwithstanding. In order to reinforce that school policies are consistently enforced for all students, regardless of SES, behavioral and academic expectations must be periodically communicated to students and parents in a wide array of modes, from personal (orientation presentations by administrators) to technical (Internet based). In addition, incoming administrators must be vigilant in creating communication pathways for parents to access their child’s teachers, counselors, advisors and coaches. An increasing number of parents at high SES secondary schools are asking for up-to-date information about their child’s academic progress. Therefore, it is highly recommended that administrators at these schools promote the use of Internet-based websites that display updated student assignments, grades, and graduation requirements.

With respect to parents who are involved in decision making committees at the school, due consideration must be given by incoming high SES administrators in determining which parents are leaders at the school, and what their needs are. However, after school hours these principals should exercise more caution. Although research strongly suggests that new principals actively participate in community functions outside of the school day, limiting social contact with parents in high SES school communities ensures a greater degree of objectivity when an administrator is making decisions for their children.

With higher academic and extracurricular expectations by members of a high SES learning community, incoming administrators must ensure that the curricular opportunities for
the students at their schools are of high merit and/or highly technical (e.g. advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, pre-engineering) and the faculty, administration, and staff alike strongly support these offerings. Assuring that all teachers are highly qualified to teach in their subject area is one way toward assuring that this is upheld.

Incoming administrators at high SES secondary schools should never lose sight of the more general goal of secondary school administration requiring that they effectively promote a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. Due to the unique nature of high SES schools, however, additional measures may be taken by the incoming administrators to ensure a smooth transition. These include: 1) establishing a widespread and multi-level communication network with students and parents using a variety of modes which communicates consistently enforced behavioral expectations, 2) promotion of an Internet based “parent portal” which displays up to date student academic progress, 3) investigation of highly influential parent leaders whose individual needs must be duly recognized, 4) a focused effort to ensure that high merit, highly technical academic courses are offered at the school whose teachers are highly qualified in the specific subject area presented and 5) administrators limiting their “social” interactions with parents outside of the school day to ensure professional integrity.

Recommendations for Future Study

A few recommendations became apparent in the writing of this thesis that would more fully address the subject of effective administrative practices for incoming principals serving at high SES secondary schools. As with any study, a more thorough investigation of previous research may produce more valid and comprehensive survey questions, which could be incorporated into future research studies. Also, expanding the study to twenty to thirty high SES secondary schools would increase the validity and reliability of the results. A study that would
investigate the possible correlation between an administrator’s socioeconomic background and the SES of the students he/she serves would add dimension to this study. In addition, a study of correspondence between a school’s annual yearly progress (AYP) and it’s SES may provide educators with how these two factors are related, if at all. Finally, investigating the overall effects of high SES students taking extended family vacations during the school year may shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of this practice.
http://www.cdl.org/resource-library/articles/change_ldr.php

California Department of Education-2006 Base API LEA Report. Retrieved on April 8, 2007 from:

City of Thousand Oaks - Demographics. Retrieved on March 27, 2007 from:
http://www.ci.thousand-oaks.ca.us/working/demo.asp


Historical Income Tables-Households. Retrieved on April 6, 2007 from:
http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/h06ar.html


Socioeconomic Status – North Central Regional Educational Library. Retrieved on April 8, 2007 from: http://www.ncrel/sdrs/areas/issues/students/earlycld/ea7lk5.htm
Appendix A: Principal Questionnaire (n = 6)

**Instructions:** Using the key above, please make an “X” in the box (sorry, no multiple box answers) that most accurately reflects your opinion of the statement. Then return to James Martinez at Newbury Park High School via inter-district mail before 10/24/06 (Tuesday). Your participation and prompt response is greatly appreciated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>SA (0%)</th>
<th>A (33%)</th>
<th>N (0%)</th>
<th>D (50%)</th>
<th>SD (17%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students from high socioeconomic status families have as many educational challenges as those from low socioeconomic families</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students from high socioeconomic status families have as many social challenges as those from low socioeconomic families</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Incoming administrators need to prepare differently to serve at a high socioeconomic status school than one where there is a more diverse SES student population.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Members of the faculty at my school regularly complain that they feel pressured by high socioeconomic status parents.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My schools’ academic and behavioral policies are written with the needs of high socioeconomic status students in mind.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I seriously considered the socioeconomic status of my school before accepting my administrative position here.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teachers from high socioeconomic status families teach students from high socioeconomic status better.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>One of the highest priorities when I accepted the administrative position at my school was to get along well with the parents of my students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Helping students get accepted to prestigious or “name” colleges/universities is more a priority of my students’ parents than it is for me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Low socioeconomic status students are at a disadvantage at a school with a high percentage of high socioeconomic status students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>My counselors, co-administrators and I see a higher percentage of low socioeconomic status students in the office regarding to discipline issues than students from high socioeconomic status families.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: SA=Strongly A=Agree N=Neutral D=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree
## Appendix B: Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>For demographic purposes, please state your age, the number of years teaching experience, teaching credential type (e.g. single subject English) and the number of years you’ve served as an administrator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In what environments have you had administrative experience? (public/private. high/middle/low socioeconomic status schools. urban/rural, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Related to upbringing, what SES do you consider yourself (high/medium/low)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>In your opinion, what are the most important personal traits an administrator needs to possess to successfully transition into a high socioeconomic status school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How much earlier (if at all) did you visit the school where you now work prior to the first day of class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Describe your most recent transition as the principal of a new school. How long did it take for you to feel comfortable there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>How much a part of the school’s social community (outside of your role as an administrator) do you feel you are?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What personal traits do you have that you feel are effective to be an administrator at a high SES school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What administrative strategies are essential in serving high socioeconomic status students and their families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What high SES parent attitudes, if any, affect your ability to lead your school, and how do you best respond to them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>What specific characteristics/strategies do teachers exhibit/use that best serves high socioeconomic status students and their families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>If you had to give one bit of advice to an administrator who is entering their first year at a high SES school (and having no previous experience at that type of school), what would that advice be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>In response to the survey statement “Incoming administrators need to prepare differently to serve at a high socioeconomic status school than one where there is a more diverse SES student population”, you agreed. However, you did not agree that you seriously considered the socioeconomic status of my school before accepting my administrative position there. What do you know now that you did not know then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The survey asked whether students from high socioeconomic status families have as many educational or social challenges as those from low socioeconomic families. Your response was ____________ (educational) and ____________ (social). Can you explain the basis for these responses?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The survey asked whether low socioeconomic status students are at a disadvantage at a school with a high percentage of high socioeconomic status students. Your response was ____________. Can you explain further?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The survey asked whether you, your co-administrators, and counselors see a higher percentage of low socioeconomic status students in the office regarding to discipline issues than students from high socioeconomic status families. Your response was _____________. Can you explain further?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>