THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL

SUCCESION

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Abstract

From the teachers’ perspective, what effective leadership strategies lead to a positive principal succession, and what leadership strategies do first year administrators use to ensure a positive transition of leadership? What are the feelings and attitudes of the teachers experiencing principal succession? These questions are important for schools to as transition of leadership become more frequent in education. This descriptive study examined principal succession at one high socioeconomic school. Using mixed research methods, many strategies that led to a positive principal succession were discovered, and the attitudes of the teachers experiencing the succession were evaluated. The results of the study may assist both teachers and principals as they try to experience a positive transition of leadership.
Principal Succession commonly occurs in today’s educational environment. A principal succession can have a varied affect on a school and its teachers (Hart, 1991). Many times, when a principal succession occurs, the environment and practices of a school and its teachers change (Fullan 2002; Jones & Webber, 2001; Noonan and Goldman 1995). This change can be positive or negative for the school community.

Wildfire Elementary School, the school at the focus of this descriptive study, has experienced three principal transitions for the last ten years. According to many of the teachers, the initial effectiveness of the incoming principal related directly to the strategies and programs they implemented during their first year at the school site. Also, the teachers had to adjust to new leadership practices and philosophies of each of the new leaders.

At the beginning of 2006 school year, Wildfire Elementary School welcomed its newest leader, Mr. Water (pseudonym). The new post was the principal’s first administrative assignment, and he was not hired from within the Wildfire Elementary School’s district. Thus, many teachers wondered if the succession process would be successful, how the principal would change the policies and procedures of the school, and if he could effectively manage the high socioeconomic (SES) school community.

Early on, the school was experiencing an overwhelming positive school principal succession. Many teachers expressed their happiness with the principal and succession process. They felt positive about the future of the school. Given the pitfalls inherent in a leadership transition, why did the teachers perceive that Wildfire Elementary School was experiencing such a positive principal succession?
This question is difficult to answer, but many facts are known from research on succession. First, a new principal’s decisions directly affect how teachers teach, their perception of how successful a school is in educating students, and their judgment about the succession process (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Hart 1991; Jones & Webber, 2001; Noonan & Goldman, 1995). Second, a principal’s degree of success is affected by how receptive teachers are to implementing a new administrator’s philosophy and ideas (Fullan 2002; Jones & Webber, 2001; Noonan & Goldman 1995). Thus, if a principal utilizes certain leadership and management strategies that are perceived as positive by the teachers, then the teachers will be more willing to accept the principal as leader and implement the strategies. Ultimately, their willingness toward implementing the new principal’s ideas will lead to a greater chance of a positive transition of leadership.

The main goal of the study was to determine management and leadership strategies for a first year principal at a high SES school that teachers perceived as effective and positive. By revealing these strategies, the looking glass or lens through which teachers see principal succession can be more clearly defined for any new administrator.

To achieve the goal described above, it was decided to focus the research on principal succession using the perceptions of teachers from Wildfire Elementary School. The research questions for this paper are the following:

1. From the teachers’ perspective, what are the effective leadership strategies that lead to a positive principal succession?
2. From the teachers’ perspective, what leadership strategies do first year administrators use to ensure a positive transition of leadership?
3. What are the feelings and attitudes of the teachers experiencing principal succession?
Definitions

High socioeconomic (SES) – a term that combines family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community (See Appendix A, Figure 1, for median family incomes of those families attending Wildfire Elementary School). High SES parents have more access to resources that promote and support a child’s development. Characteristic of high SES include having easy access to information their children's health, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive development. These families also have high-quality child care, books, and toys to encourage children in various learning activities at home (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, n.d.).

Review of Literature

In order to guide this study and to answer the research questions, 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 (Coutts, Cochran, & Terry, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hart, 1991;) agreed that principals assuming responsibilities at a new post, face significant challenges in adapting to their new positions. These challenges included, but were not limited to, effectively communicating with various members of the school community, assimilating into the school’s culture, and understanding the importance of established school programs (Coutts, Cochran, & Terry, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). Specific research has been focused on principal succession in high SES schools, where high parental expectations and increased academic pressures on students compound the challenges (Kohn, 1998; Lambert 2003). The review of literature summarized findings from the research articles that were grouped by subject.

General Principals
Educational researchers (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) concurred that there are commonly agreed upon principles that every successful principal should follow in their leadership roles. Fullan (2002) encouraged principals assuming leadership at a new school to think beyond their primary role as instructional leaders. He advised 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.” When an administrator thinks of him or herself as a change leader, they can build group unity and allow the teachers to perceive change as a positive necessity and that the principal plays a pivotal role in the change process (Fullan, 2002). Fullan (2002) emphasized long-term sustainability and learning in context for new principals. Sustainability and learning in context allowed teachers to perceive the validity of the new administrator’s programs and provided them with shared ownership of the school (Davidson & Taylor; 1999; Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004).

Hargreaves and Fink (2004) concurred with many of Fullan’s ideas about leadership change. These researchers defined important goals for principals to focus on in the first years of succession. In their opinion, principals should (a) create and preserve sustained learning; (b) sustain leadership concepts and programs through building the leadership capacity of others on the staff; (c) address issues of social justice; (d) develop (not deteriorate) human/material resources; (e) develop environmental diversity and capacity (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

All these practices put teachers at the forefront of change and without their willingness to change the concepts above cannot be built at any school (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hart 1991).

Principal Succession
Many studies specifically addressed the important topic of succession, and strategies a new administrator may implement to increase the probability of a successful transition of leadership (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Hart, 1991; Lagore & Parker, 1997; Noonan & Goldman, 1995). It was also found that first year administrators face unique challenges that principals with more tenure at their sites do not (McMillan, 1993).

Lagore and Parker (1997) discussed the type of principal that would be most effective in instituting change. Principals, who may have transferred from another school within the district or were promoted from a teaching position at the school site (insiders), had the advantage of having adapting to the school environment. However, they generally were adaptors, not innovators. Principals who were hired from outside the district (outsiders) had an easier transition to power, but can be negatively affected in their new role by faculty/staff jealousy and resentment. In Lagore and Parker’s opinion, an insider chosen locally who exhibited outsider characteristics most effectively administered during a succession. Selecting this type of principal was most effective for two reasons. First, teachers perceived the principal as a change maker. If the teachers wanted to keep previously established programs and work with the new principal they had to become interconnected. This unity helped the school function more efficiently. Second, the changes brought by the new leader, many times, had positive outcomes and changed the way teachers perceived and implemented the programs of the school. This change brought new ideas into the learning environment for students.

Davidson and Taylor (1999) and Hart (1991) discussed accommodation time and leadership strategies for an incoming principal. Hart (1991) stated accommodation time could range from three months to five years. It may take up to five years because succession is a disruptive event, and the community may not be ready to accept the new leader (Hart, 1991).
Davidson and Taylor (1999) wrote that incoming principals who promoted established school programs had a greater success in the succession process. This happened because teachers perceived that the principal valued their work and expertise (Davidson & Taylor, 1999). Also, the school communities’ perception about how well the principal’s educational emphases and beliefs aligned with their own made a difference in acclimatization time (Hart, 1991). The closer the alignment was perceived, the shorter the acclamation was for the new leader (Davidson & Taylor, 1999). Simply, the community, of which the teachers are a part, was more willing to accept the ideas of a leader if they felt he or she had the similar educational views (Davidson & Taylor 1999; Hart, 1991).

Next, Hart (1991) found that efforts principals made to clearly communicate their expectations must be legitimate for the principal to succeed. Teachers perceived unclear or insincere communication about expectation as a sign of ineffective leadership (Hart 1991). This conclusion followed Davidson and Taylor’s (1999) findings that when succession principals behave in ways that show genuine concern and expertise, subordinates responded favorably. In addition, Hart (1991) declared that during the first year the principal and school community acclimated to the new situation there was an inherent pressure to not make too many changes. Hart (1991) recommended to principals assigned to new positions that they develop long-range educational strategies and focus on developing their relationships with teachers. By doing this, teachers perceived the principal as a leader who showed genuine concern for their well-being.

Lastly, Davidson and Taylor (1999) emphasized that new administrators should focus on the building the leadership capabilities of the teachers. Through building leadership capacity, teachers believed the administrator’s ideas had validity and that they were an integral part in
success of the school (Davidson and Taylor, 1999). All of these strategies can reduce accommodation time for succession 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 recognized two factors that related to teacher perceptions of succession. First, the degree to which a principal showed concern about being perceived by the teachers as uncaring affected the amount of change that occurred at a school. The more concerned the principal was, the less change occurred. Second, the ability of a principal to be an orchestrator of faculty and resources affected the climate of the school. If a principal obtained supplies and dealt effectively with the faculty then his or her leadership was perceived as positive. In their view, principals should make changes and obtain necessary resource, and not be overly concerned with teachers’ perceptions of their leadership abilities.

McMillan (1993) interviewed five Canadian secondary school principals for his study that focused on principal succession. He stated that the amount of administrative experience incoming principals enter a new school with could significantly affect perception of teachers and the overall effectiveness of the succession. Principals, taking leadership of a school for the first time in their career, did receive a “honeymoon” period where teachers allowed them the chance to adjust to the new environment and begin to make changes. However, the principals had to try and implement changes, while at the same time, realizing and incorporating past school practices into the new program. Otherwise, teacher resentment and resistance began to build at school. The more experience principals have the less likely they were to implement changes in the school. Many times, they left the implementation of change to their vice-principals. However, more experienced principals have transitioning into another setting the better informed they were by
previous experience. In essence, McMillan found balance between inexperienced principals willing to try new with more tenured administrators acting on years of practical experience. McMillan felt that regardless of experience, creative tension was necessary in any educational environment to foster positive change. This tension altered teachers’ perception of what was possible at their school site and forced them to adjust to new leadership.

Faculty/Staff Considerations

To gain a full understanding of how a school’s faculty and staff are affected by succession, the psychological stages of succession as well as evaluative procedures that relate to teachers’ perception of succession were investigated (Coutts, Cochran, & Terry, 1997; Hart 1991; Jones & Webber, 2001). Jones and Webber (2001) and Hart (1991) agreed with fellow researchers (Fullan, 2002; Noonan and Goldman 1995), about the importance of becoming a respected member and affirmed leader of the existing social organization within a school environment, especially when assuming a new principalship. Without being perceived as the leader, subordinates will not implement the leader’s changes (Fullan, 2002).

Jones and Webber (2001) and Hart (1991) defined psychological stages of emotion that faculty members may experience after a new principal assumes leadership at their school. Jones and Webber (2001) described these stages as fear, detachment, expectation of change, enchantment, and disenchantment. Hart (1991) saw these stages as encounter, adjustment, and stabilization. No matter which scale is used, one can see that teachers worked through stages of adjustment. The stage that teachers were collectively at on the continuum was a significant factor in how they viewed the succession (Jones & Webber, 2001). Jones and Webber (2001) also cautioned against school districts promoting principals from within their districts, as these administrators tend to make decisions that follow existing district policy, which can be outdated.
This reduced the likelihood of objectivity and creativity during principal succession. These actions built teacher resentment and apathy with the succession process (Jones & Webber, 2001). Jones and Webber (2001) also concluded that initial impression played a key role in the success of a new administrator. The more qualities and ideas that were initially perceived by the teachers as positive the more positive the transition of leadership. Both Hart (1991) and Jones and Webber (2001) advocated that succession principals should meet with teachers and parents to help build group cohesion, dispel worry, and help the community through the beginning psychological stages of succession.

Coutts, Cochran, and Terry (1997) advocated the use of a survey to evaluate administrative successors and to determine teachers’ perception of the succession. The survey they recommended is called the Effective Schools Climate Inventory (ESCI). The ESCI can be given to school personnel to determine how a new principal’s perceptions align with the perceptions of his or her faculty and staff. Coutts, Cochran, and Terry stated that it is not uncommon to find only small differences between the perception of the teachers and the principal.

**High SES Concerns**

According to Kohn (1998) and Lambert (2003) a new principal position at a high SES school had many considerations inherent to that role due to the unique qualities of these communities. These considerations affected the perceptions of the parents, students, and teachers (Kohn, 1998; Lambert, 2003).

Kohn (1998) wrote that affluent, high SES parents eroded important and necessary educational reform by pressuring principals to maintain the “status quo” in their schools. According to Kohn, these parents did this because they were highly competitive individuals who
put excessive pressure on their children to excel academically, and tried to block efforts for school reform because innovative practices might have adversely impacted their child’s academic average. The aversion to change could have affected teacher perception because teachers may have internalized the parents’ beliefs and resisted change (Kohn, 1998). In Kohn’s view, high SES parents made the succession process difficult as they held to the belief in traditional practices, such as worksheets and student rank, rather than accepting change. The tension between the parents and the new principal caused because of the resistance to change may alter teacher perception of the effectiveness of the succession. Kohn suggested a number of strategies, such as reaching out to parent groups and determining legitimate paternal concerns, as a way to mitigate any negative effect parents may have on the functioning of the school and teacher perception of succession.

Lambert (2003) indicated that another factor that contributed to the success of an incoming principal at a high SES school was how he or she related to the parents and to the teachers within the school community. If teachers and parents perceived the principal as relating well to them, the greater the chance was for a positive principal succession. Lambert showcased many effective strategies that can be implemented by an incoming administrator to help them relate more effectively to a high SES parent population. Among the effective strategies were (a) stating explicitly the school’s high expectations for parental involvement; (b) making as many parents and teachers as possible an active part of the shared vision of the school; (c) providing parent information on how to assist their children with their schoolwork at home; (d) giving parents the opportunity to voice their opinions about difficult school issues; (e) keeping parent participation broad-based in leadership and decision-making groups.

Summary
In summary, research over the last fifteen years has shown that there are a wide variety of factors that can affect teacher perceptions of the succession process and their view of a new administrator’s performance. This literature review revealed many factors including: administrative presence and communication, school history, established programs, faculty and staff concerns, parent values and advocacy, alignment of the principal’s personal values to the school, and the educational approach promoted by the principal all play a part in forming and determining teacher perceptions. It was also found that teachers progress through psychological stages and experience certain emotions as they advance through the succession process. These factors and stages of teacher transition became the basis for the hypothesis, survey, interview questions, and research methodology of this study.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the study was conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitatively methods. This mixture of research methods gave the researcher more opportunities to gather different forms of data within the school site. Mertler and Charles (2005) stated that a descriptive study with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for cross-checking and improved data reliability. Thus, the mixed methods employed in the study provided a greater degree of reliability and validity to the results.

Setting

The majority of data was collected from an affluent, high SES school that recently experienced a principal succession, in the Southern California geographic area. Wildfire Elementary School (pseudonym) is a public K-8 technology magnet public school.

Wildfire Elementary School was a K-5 configuration for over forty years, and had recently added grades six and seven. Houses in neighborhoods surrounding the school currently
sell for one to two million dollars. The school’s location was rural and remote in a canyon that is over eight miles away from the nearest neighboring district school site. The district office is eleven miles from the school. In 2008, eighth grade will be added to Wildfire Elementary School, and it will become a fully functional K-8 school. In the past ten years, Wildfire Elementary School experienced three principal successions. The most recent outgoing principal spent four years at the school. Still, the leadership of the school changed every three years on average. The school’s location allowed it to admit students from the three neighboring districts.

The school’s parent involvement has historically been enthusiastic and widespread. In the 2006-2007, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) had over 78 active board members who were either ran or assisted running many programs for the school. This number of active board members was the highest in the district as well. In fact, parents were a part of nearly all key decision-making bodies, including the school site council. Also, parent volunteers helped to coordinate and run many of Wildfire Elementary School’s programs, such as an artist in the classroom program. In the last four years, the PTA raised from $75,000 - $100,000 annually to help support the various academic/non-curricular programs at the school.

Like many schools in the area, the teachers and administrators worked cooperatively with the parents and the surrounding community to improve the schools. In the last four years, the school raised enrollment from 234 to 490 students. The increase in enrollment was due in large part to the entire school community working together to publicize the school’s programs and the unique technology-based curriculum.

Participants

All twenty-one teachers full-time classroom, consisting of three male and eighteen female teachers, at Wildfire Elementary School agreed to participate. The teachers’ classroom
experience ranged from being in the first year to teaching for thirty-five years, with a mean of ten years of teaching experience. The number of previous experiences with principal succession also varied within the group. Thirteen teachers experienced at least three principal successions, six others experienced one change in school administration, and two of the teachers were going through their first occurrence of a change in leadership.

Four of the 21 teachers were purposefully selected to interview in-depth for this study (See Appendix B, Table 1). All teachers considered for the interview must have taught at the Wildfire Elementary School for at least two years and have experienced at least one principal succession. Of the twenty-one teachers on staff, eleven met the eligibility requirements. One primary grade teacher (grades kindergarten through second), two middle grade teachers (grades third through fifth), and one middle school teacher (grade six) were selected to participate. The selection of these teachers allowed for the gathering of a representative sample of the teachers’ views about the succession process.

**Instruments**

Data was collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitatively methods including a teacher survey, teacher interviews, and a personal journal (see Appendix B, Table 2 for exact dates and participants for each form of data collection).

**Survey.** The first round of surveys occurred in early October, and the second round took place in February. All twenty-one teachers at Wildfire Elementary School received the ten-question survey (see Appendix C for survey sheet) that focused on their perceptions of the succession process. The questions were generated from other surveys examined that involved a similar topic that contained comparably styled questions (D’Abron, Duigan, Dwyer, and Goodwin 2001; Shen and Cooley, 1999). The teachers selected the degree by which they agreed
or disagreed with the question posed, and were allowed to write any comments regarding the questions. Teachers were given a week and a half to complete the survey. The survey processes was repeated in February with the same survey.

*Teacher interviews.* Four teachers, who had at least two years of experience at the school and had experienced at least one principal transition, were selected to be interviewed about the current principal succession. The teachers selected also represented a cross section of the various grade levels at the Wildfire Elementary School. The interviews were semi-structured interview, and took place in October and February (see Appendix D for interview questions). The questions for interviews were generated from previous questionnaires examined that focused on a similar topic regarding principal secession (Morfors, 2002; Senn, 2001). The interviews took place in October and February. The questions were revised for the February interviews based upon initial analysis of the October interview data, and to better address the study’s research questions.

The four teachers were interviewed separately over a two-week period. These interviews took place in the teacher’s classrooms, during a time of when the interview could not be interrupted. One February interview, with Mrs. Melody, the kindergarten teacher, was conducted over the phone. Each interview took approximately one half-hour to complete. Although the interviews generally followed the questionnaires, the respondents were allowed to speak freely. The teacher’s responses were tape recorded and later transcribed. Each teacher was also given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

After the interview was transcribed each interviewee had an opportunity to examine her comments and make changes to responses given. The only changes made were grammatical errors.
**Personal journals.** The last form of data collected came from the researcher’s personal journal kept to describe the succession process at Wildfire Elementary School. In the journal, various observations were recorded as the school progressed through the succession process. Comments included observations of the principal during staff meetings, school assemblies, and during recess and lunch times. The reactions of the teachers to decisions made by the principal throughout the school year were also recorded. Seven personal journal entries were selected to include in this study. These entries were selected because they showcased teacher perceptions of the succession process, teachers’ feelings about the decisions made by the principal, and instances where the principal was attempting to implement or reinforce certain leadership strategies.

**Description of Data Analysis Methods**

Through these three means of collection (survey, interviews, and personal journal) a degree of triangulation was created that provided validity to the study.

**Survey.** Each response was placed on a one-to-five scale, one representing strongly disagree ranging to five representing strongly agree. The numerical scores were then averaged for each question. These averages were placed on the same one-to-five scale to acquire an overall meaning for each survey question. The names and numeric ranges for the categories were strongly disagree (1.0-1.9), disagree (2.0-2.9), neutral (3.0-3.9), agree (4.0-4.9), and strongly agree (5.0). If a score averaged anywhere within a category, it was given that category name.

The scores were then placed on a graph to help better illustrate the result (See Appendix A, Figure 2). The same process described above was applied to the surveys collected in February to obtain averages and produce similar a graph (See Appendix A, Figure 3). Finally, the scores
from each survey were averaged together to obtain integrated survey results for the study (See Appendix A, Figure 4).

*Teacher survey comments.* Teachers’ written comments within the surveys were examined for common themes, an implicit or recurring idea. They were also examined for uniquely insightful remarks. To assist in the analysis of data, a spreadsheet that had a column for each question posed on the survey was created. Each written comment was placed into the appropriate question column. All the comments for each question were analyzed, and the theme, which appeared most often, was determined as the common theme for each question. Comments were chosen from the survey comments to provide evidence for the theme discovered. The process was repeated again in February.

*Teacher interviews.* The next form data collection was teacher interviews. After each collection period, each interview was read through and compared with the other interviews. Themes found in the interviews were written down, and the frequency of occurrence was tallied to determine if the theme was found in other interviews. Themes that appeared at least two times were determined to be significant, and these themes were written down in a separate spreadsheet. Particularly insightful remarks were quoted from the interviews and used to provide evidence for the themes ascertained.

*Personal journal.* For each collection period, the entries selected were examined collectively for common themes regarding teacher perception of succession. The themes that appeared in at least two of the selected entries, from each collection period, were recorded in a spreadsheet, were determined to be significant.

*Integrated Data Analysis*
The October set of data was examined separately from the February data. The results for each collection period were then analyzed, and synthesized collectively to obtain comprehensive results for the study. If a theme appeared in both collection periods then it was determined to be significant. In the end, the results were analyzed, discussed, and related back to literature to determine the answers for the research questions.

**Limitations**

Although the study produced many findings, there were limitations to the generalizability of the findings. First, the study was limited to one school year. In order to produce more valid conclusions, the study should continue for the next two years. Utilization of this time frame, would allow for more observations and regarding the succession process overall, the leadership strategies the teachers perceived as effective, and the affect of the succession process on teachers could be more accurately measured. Second, the study was limited to data obtained from teachers. To obtain a wider view of how teachers perceive the succession process, data could be taken from the principal, parents, other school community members, and teachers’ families. These individuals and groups could report comments made by the teachers that relate to their perceptions of principal succession. A decision was made for this study to focus on data collected from just the teachers in order to limit its size, and to assure focused results that directly related to the research questions. Lastly, the conclusions made in the study can only truly be applied to Wildfire Elementary School.

To better substantiate the conclusions, similar schools experiencing principal succession should also be studied as well. Again, the decision was made to focus on one school in order to limit the study’s size. In the future, other researchers may substantiate the conclusions of the study by expanding its scope to similar schools experiencing principal succession.
Results

The results for the study were separated into two sections: October Results and November Results. Each section was further broken down into significant themes (implicit or recurring idea) discovered via collective analysis of the data.

October Results

Five themes were extrapolated from the first collection period. These themes focused on how teachers perceived their principal, how they adjusted to new leadership, what leadership strategies were effective during a principal succession, the degree of change that happened at the school, and how the high SES status of the school affected decisions made by the principal.

*Teacher perception of the principal.* The teachers perceived Mr. Water (pseudonym), the principal, as an effective leader. This occurred for a number of reasons. At the first staff meeting, Mr. Water set forth and established his educational philosophy, and focused the majority of the first staff meeting on making the school “world famous.” This action allowed teachers to see that a professional and more focused philosophy, instituted in the first day of Mr. Waters’ administrative career, would be the new standard at Wildfire Elementary School. As the fifth grade teacher, who was not interviewed, wrote in her survey of the first week of school, “He has made expectations clear to all-staff, students, and parents.”

In the same way, Mr. Water’s ability to listen and be open to suggestions and ask about previous practice made teachers feel valued and appreciated. As Mrs. White indicated, “…He definitely sets a professional tone, without making you feel that he is condescending or talking down to you. Most of his decisions he asks for staff input, and somethings he decided on his own…”
The teachers indicated that Mr. Water’s energetic personality and positive way of dealing with the staff made them feel comfortable and at ease with his leadership style. In fact, three of four teachers interviewed said that they had a positive first impression of Mr. Water because of his way of working with the staff. The ability to run the school efficiently, without major interruption in the daily routine, made teachers feel that the transition of leadership was progressing positively. This idea is supported by the teacher interviews because no one indicated a school wide issue that the principal should focus on solving. The teacher survey also provided support for the results described above. It showed that the teachers agreed (scores of 4.4 for each area) that the principal was an effective leader, that the principal had the support of the school community, and that the teachers felt comfortable interacting with the Mr. Water.

All of the factors described above, seem to aid in the teachers’ perception that Mr. Water possessed the willingness and the ability to effectively lead Wildfire Elementary School. Also, they teachers expressed appreciation for Mr. Water because he made sure they were included in the decision making process of the school. As a second grade teacher wrote in her survey, “He has been very willing to work and listen to staff about questions and concerns. He frequently asks for input on how things use to be done, or how we would feel if it changed.”

This created a sense of acceptance of Mr. Water by the teachers, as well as a sense of validation for the school program already established at the school. Lastly, the teachers’ perceived acceptance of Mr. Water by the parents of Wildfire Elementary School allowed them to recognize that a large sector of the school community supported the principal. This may have helped shaped the overall teachers’ perception that Mr. Water effectively led the school.

Teacher adjustment. The teachers felt positive about the principal succession, and felt that they had adjusted well to the coming of the new leader. The personal journal showcased that
the teachers felt consistently positive about Mr. Water’s leadership style, and many teachers comments and the teachers survey indicated how personally pleased they were with the succession process. As Mrs. French indicated, “(It has been) a lot smoother than I thought it would be. Really at all grade levels, a lot smoother than most of us thought it would be.”

Still, teachers wanted to allow the principal time to adjust and were waiting for more decisions to be made before making a final judgment about the succession process. As a second grade teacher wrote in her survey comments, “He has only been here for a month and a half—not really long enough to judge him, I don’t think. But so far, everything is positive.”

According to the teachers, Mr. Water helped the teachers feel more comfortable with his leadership style because they received support from Mr. Water when issues with parents arose. As Mrs. Melody stated, “I think he is 100% for the teachers. I feel that if there is a teacher that has a problem, he is going to support us.”

This support made teachers feel valued and that Mr. Water had the best interest of the school at the center of his decisions. Also, Mr. Waters’ ability to listen, work long hours, and implement new programs kept teachers pleased with the succession process and willing to accept more changes. They perceived that he was always working to make the school a more effective learning environment for students. Thus, resentment and displeasure, characteristic of the disillusionment stage of principal succession (Jones &Webber, 2001), did not occur.

Effective leadership strategies. From the teachers’ perceptions, Mr. Water utilized many effective leadership strategies, and these strategies contributed to a positive principal succession. First, the data from the teacher survey (score of 4.1 on question five) and teacher interviews indicated that Mr. Water listened to and collaborated with the staff about school wide decisions. Also, Mr. Water continually expressed appreciation for the contribution and ideas of his staff
members. As Mrs. White’s fifth grade teaching partner wrote in her survey, “He has been receptive to comments and suggestions. He openly states his appreciation for people’s work.”

This willingness to collaborate, seek teacher input regarding school wide decisions, and showing appreciation built trust and a sense of value between the staff and the principal. Also, this strategy helped teachers to perceive that previous programs at the school were valued, but new ideas and approaches were readily considered and accepted.

The second strategy that teachers perceived that Mr. White employed was establishing some new aspects to the vision and philosophy of the school. At the first staff meeting and throughout the time of the first data collection period, Mr. Water would only use staff meetings to discuss and implement his educational philosophy or to discuss school wide issue. He did not spend much time of schedule or individual questions. This idea is support by the August 28, 2006 personal journal entry that detailed the first staff meeting of the year: “He spent much of his time on the educational philosophy for the school. He did not go over the scheduling issues or introduce the staff.”

This type of management style focused the teachers of larger issues that affected everyone, and the teachers’ perceived that Mr. Water was concerned that his first year of leadership centered on the overall improvement of Wildfire Elementary School.

According to the fourth and seventh grade teacher surveys, the principal also implemented a few new academic and social programs at the school. These programs included a middle school ski club, a middle school basketball program, a fourth and fifth grade afterschool intervention program, and a lunch time football program. Teachers perceived these programs as positive, and saw them as an avenue for a first year administrator to build rapport with the students and the teachers.
The last strategy that Mr. Water utilized was the reorganizing of the discipline plan at Wildfire Elementary School to bring about improved student behavior. All four interviewed teachers indicated that this was a positive strategy, especially for a first year principal, because they perceived it as a way to convey the philosophy that learning is an important matter. As Mrs. White stated, “I think one of his strengths (Mr. Water) is his seriousness about the school day and about discipline.” Teachers perceived that reorganizing the discipline plan assisted them in solving some challenging disciplinary issues. Also, teachers indicated that the consistent enforcement of disciplinary consequences helped them see that the principal felt strongly about school order and aided teachers in maximizing teaching time. They began to see Mr. Water as an ally that helped them to more effectively teach. This seemed to build more trust between and the principal and his staff.

Pace of change. Even with the changes to programs described above, teachers perceived the pace of change to the school vision and programs as slow. The teacher survey supported this result because it showed the teachers felt the principal was not making changes too quickly. Also, the changes that had been made were perceived by the teachers as positive. As a second grade teacher wrote, “He usually asks ‘what has been done in the past?’, and has only tampered with things that were not working.”

The strategies and ideas that Mr. Water utilized to make minor changes to the school’s programs were seen by the teachers as a way to stabilize the school community and enhance previous practices. The teachers believed that these strategies developed a more collaborative relationship between the principal and school community. The relationship resulted in teachers perceiving that the succession process was positive and that Mr. Water effectively led the school.
Affect of high SES on decisions. The data was inconclusive about the affect of high SES on the decisions made by a new principal. All four interviewed teachers indicated that Mr. Water did not allow the pressure of the PTA or individual parents affect his decisions. However, the teacher survey illustrated that the teachers were neutral about the affect of high SES on the decision making process. A second grade teacher clarified the contrasting data when she wrote, “I believe that the decisions made at our school are partly driven by parents, but for the most part they are in the best interest of the students regardless of SES.”

February Results

The data for February produced six overall themes. Five of the six themes discovered mirrored those found in October. One new theme discovered focused on how teachers perceived the possibility of district initiated changes to Wildfire Elementary School’s programs.

Effectiveness of the principal. The teachers still perceived Mr. Water as an effective principal. This perception was supported by facts from the data collected. The teacher survey showed (with a score of 4.5) that the teachers agreed Mr. Water was an effective leader. All four interviewed teachers indicated that felt he was an effective principal, and comments in four of four personal journal entries selected for the study specifically stated that teachers felt Mr. Water was an effective leader.

The teacher interviews also showed that teachers’ perceived Mr. Water as an effective leader because their initial impression did not change. As Mrs. French stated, “I had a really positive initial reaction when he came, and he is living up to it.”

According to the teachers, the perception at Mr. Water lead the Wildfire Elementary School effectively happened for a number of reasons. He continued to utilize open
communication with his staff. They also perceived him as fair. As one male second grade teacher wrote, “He is likable, fair, positive, and consistent.”

According to ten of 14 teachers who wrote comments for the teachers’ surveys, Mr. Water also was highly visible at the school and involved himself in many programs and committees at the school. As a fourth grade teacher wrote in her survey:

“…he has listened to the new ideas of teachers and parents and tried to implement them. For example, the middle school discipline system, backpack hook idea, trying to get tables set up in the quad, allowing the establishment of a 4/5 reading intervention program, and starting our tech path in the direction of project based learning.”

Mr. Water worked with district level personal to keep school programs operational, and he kept the school community informed about issues affecting the entire school. For example, it was noted in the personal journal that the principal consistently met with the district personnel to make sure the full day kindergarten program would be kept in place for the following academic year. Second, the teachers perceived that Mr. Water lacked a fear handling difficult issues, but also held himself accountable for his actions with the staff. In the same way, Mr. Water was supportive of teachers when parental question arose. The teachers stated that they appreciated that, as a first new administrator, Mr. Water made sure that expectations were continually reestablished and conveyed through assemblies and interactions with the students. Lastly, the teachers perceived Mr. Water as an effective leader because they felt the day-to-day operations of the school happened without incident.

All these actions helped to shape the teachers positive perception of Mr. Water. The staff expressed appreciation the open line of communication and valued the fairness displayed by Mr.
Water. One first grade teacher wrote, “He is very approachable and up front and I appreciate these qualities very much. Also, (he) verbally states his appreciation to me regularly.”

It appeared the teachers saw Mr. Water as reasonable. Being highly visible and involved in school programs, as well as showing support for teachers with parents seem to be a key in shaping a positive perception of the principal for teachers. They perceived Mr. Water was a caring professional and that he had a true desire to make the learning environment better for everyone. Teachers saw fearlessness and supporting school programs at the district level as a validation of their teaching practices and as an example of Mr. Waters’ commitment toward achieving school goals. The teachers felt that Mr. Water showed care for the school by providing information about issues to the school community. Lastly, the consistency in the operation of the school allowed teachers to feel comfortable about the succession process and gave them the opportunity to focus on instruction.

**Teacher adjustment.** Just as in October, the teacher perceived that the succession process was positive and that they adjusted well. The teacher survey score of 4.2 obtained from the question that specifically asked about teacher adjustment in the succession process offered evidence for this conclusion. The teachers were pleased with Mr. Water’s decision making process and were excited about the future with him as the leader. As a first grade teacher stated in her survey, “I enjoy having him as my principal. He is wonderful!”

The teachers were still allowing the principal time to adjust and decide how he would lead the school in the future. One of the factors that the teachers perceived as helpful in the adjustment process was their readiness to accept a new leader and the changes he proposed. The teachers indicated they helped the principal adjust by being open and willing to attempt his new leadership. Three of four teachers interviewed confirmed this idea when they stated that the
teachers wanted a new principal to take over at the end of the last academic year. As Mrs. White stated of the leadership situation, “… I think what makes it easy is that our principal last year was only part time. So, having someone here all the time, who is available, to us makes it a lot easier.”

It is important to note that teachers did perceive some weakness in Mr. Water’s leadership of Wildfire Elementary School. Three of four teachers interviewed comments stated a concern that Mr. Water may have focused too much of his energy on the middle school program. Other concerns expressed both by Mrs. White and Mrs. French were Mr. Water not understanding district procedures, and that there was a lack of school committee meetings.

*Effective leadership strategies.* Similar to October, the teachers pointed out some effective leadership strategies that aided in creating a positive principal succession. First among these strategies was the principal’s ability to listen to and collaborate with the staff and the school community. For the teachers, this approach reestablished for them the principal’s belief in teamwork and trying to make the school a more effective learning environment. Second. Mr. Water’s ability to act as a role model to both staff and students was perceived by the teachers as an effective way to set a positive tone for the behavioral, academic, and occupational expectations of the entire school community. As Mrs. French indicated, “I think he is a great role model for the rest of us. He has lots of energy and works really hard. Everybody appreciates it. Everyone sees he works as hard as we are.”

Another strategy that assisted in a positive principal succession, according to the teachers, was obtaining and maintaining community support for school program. Mr. Water consistently met with parent groups to gather ideas, and provide information. According to the teachers, this
built a sense of community, decreased anxiety over difficult issues facing the school, and dispelled misconceptions and misinformation parents may have had.

The teachers also perceived that the discipline plan, which was built on a foundation of consistent enforcement of the rules, fairness, and follow through of consequences, facilitated a positive school succession, especially for a first year administrator. The teachers felt they could rely on Mr. Water to consistently enforce discipline, and this allowed the teachers to focus on the classroom instruction. Also, the teachers felt the way Mr. Water handled discipline reinforced his standing as the leader to the students of Wildfire Elementary School. This idea was supported by a first grade teacher when she wrote in her survey, “Students respond well to knowing the expectations (for behavior).”

The teachers also expressed that maintaining some newly implemented programs at the school showed everyone that the principal cared about the students and that he would make sure his new programs kept consistency. The teachers perceived that these programs also developed rapport and respect between the students and a first year principal. The continuation the lunch time sport program and the fourth and fifth grade intervention program were mentioned specifically as examples of this strategy.

Lastly, teachers perceived that Mr. Water’s ability to apologize for mistakes helped in his first year of leadership of the school. To the teachers, this action demonstrated humility for a first year administrator and the idea that the leader was fallible, just as they were.

_Pace of change._ The teachers continued to identify the pace of change as slow, and that the changes that were made were for the betterment of the school and to improve on previous practice. For example, the nine of the 14 teachers who returned the teacher survey expressed appreciation for the fact that as a first year administrator Mr. Water refocused the school on its
vision, made minor changes to the vision, and that he made improvements to the school’s technology programs. However, teachers also indicated that they expected see more changes in the future. As Mrs. Melody stated, “…I think things will gradually change as he (Mr. Water) gets in there (the principalship). He will have his influence.”

**Affect of high SES on decisions.** The data was inconclusive about the effect that high SES had on the decisions made at the school and on the succession process. The teachers recognized that the principal was less affected by the influence of high SES on decision then the former principal had been. The teachers attributed this to Mr. Waters’ ability to treat everyone in the school community with fairness, and as a result of his aggressive support of teachers when questions from parents arose. However, the survey question that specifically asked about this topic of high SES influence received a score of 3.5 (neutral), and three of four teachers interviewed specified that the influence of high SES had not changed since Mr. Water took over as principal. All four interviewed teachers stated that Wildfire Elementary School benefits from the high SES of the parents because the money raised by the PTA allowed for programs and activities that would otherwise not be available. The dichotomy was summed up by Mrs. French when she referenced the influence of high SES on the school:

“I do not think it changed. It allows Mr. Water to do things that other principals cannot do so readily, like getting the marquee up so quickly. Not having to gather money for your activities, and knowing the PTA is willing to support the technology upgrades. It just makes it easier to do those things. (But) it puts demands on you too.”

**School wide issues.** There were many school wide issues that Mr. Water responded to that shaped the succession process perception and of Mr. Waters’ ability to lead the school. The major issues that affected the school included the possibility of losing the full day kindergarten
program, the possible closure of the school, and the need to reestablish the technology portion of the school’s vision. The teachers pointed out some the ways Mr. Water tried to address these problems. First, he met and tried to collaborate with district staff in an attempt to justify and save the kindergarten program and the school. He met with the school community to keep parents and teachers informed about the results of these meetings. He also reestablished the technology committee, and began to hold monthly meeting to reorganize the school’s vision of technology. As of the end of the reporting period, no final decisions had been made on any of these issues.

The principal’s actions were viewed favorably by the teachers, and helped in producing a positive principal succession. The meetings Mr. Water had with district staff demonstrated to teachers that even though he was a new administrator to the district, he valued the school, its programs, and the work the teachers had done to improve upon them. Teachers saw that the meetings with the school community helped the community send a unified message to the district regarding their displeasure over the proposed changes. Lastly, the reestablishment of the technology committee allowed teachers to recognize that the principal valued the school’s technology focus.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the study show five themes that are common in both collection periods. The consistency of these themes throughout the study provides more definitive evidence to answer research questions and need further discussion. Ultimately, from these five themes, final conclusions come to light that answer the three research questions of the study.

*Teachers’ Perception of the Principal*
The teachers’ perceive that Mr. Water as an effective leader. All forms of data collected show that the teachers see him as a caring leader, who puts the best interest of the school at the center of all his decisions, and that he has high expectations for everyone within the school community. Davison and Taylor (1999) and Fullan (2002) affirm that utilizing these strategies assist in producing a positive transition of power. The teachers indicate that this feeling occurs for many reasons.

The three of seven personal journal entries and over 50% of all teacher surveys from both collection periods show that Mr. Water, as a first year administrator, set forth his educational philosophy to the staff and students at the beginning of the year, and that he consistently reaffirmed it throughout the school year. Davidson and Taylor (1999), Hart (1991) and McMillan (1993) see this leadership strategy as effective. According to the teachers, this sets a professional tone at the school, and helps students and students understand what is expected of them.

Another strategy that aids in producing the perception of effective leadership is Mr. Waters’ ability to openly communicate with his staff and seek their input and advice about how decisions would affect school programs. Many of the comments in the teacher surveys and teacher interviews give evidence for this perception. This action validates the established programs and practices of the school. Also, the teachers indicate they feel valued, appreciated and that their professional opinions are taken into consideration. Much established research views open communication, and the validation of previously established programs as two key strategies to a successful principal succession (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; McMillan, 1993).

Mr. Water additionally utilizes a policy of honesty, fairness, and consistency when interacting with both staff and students. This leads the teachers to see Mr. Water as a reasonable
leader. In the same way, teachers express a feeling comfort with Mr. Waters’ leadership style, and that there is a partnership between the teachers and the principal at Wildfire Elementary School. Fullan (2002) and Hargreaves and Fink (2004) emphasize that building this type of school community produces a school culture more ready and willing to accept change.

All but one teacher surveys for both collection periods points out to that the school runs effectively and efficiently as a result of Mr. Waters’ leadership. This perception assists in creating the feeling for the teachers that the entire succession process is progressing positively. It also allows teachers to feel at ease with the transition of leadership, and that they believe they can focus of their classroom teaching during the succession process. Davidson and Taylor (1999) and Jones and Webber (2001) point out that running a school effectively and efficiently is an important strategy in the creation of a positive principal succession.

Teachers see the ability of Mr. Water to build community support through communication as a key strategy to effective leadership by the teachers. Building community support allows the teachers to recognize that Mr. Water is accepted by the school community, that he takes time to make decisions, and that he cares about the school. Again, much established research (Kohn, 1998; Lambert 2003) advocates the need for principal to effectively communicate with the school community to assist in the principal succession process.

The last approach that the teachers perceive as an effective leadership strategy, especially for a first year principal, is the ability to be visible and involved in the programs at the school. Mr. Water consistently makes himself visible to the staff and students, and he organized and runs many lunch time programs for students. The teachers feel this shows everyone Mr. Water has energy, cares about the school, and that he has a desire to make the school a more effective learning environment for students. Both Davidson and Taylor (1999) and Hart (1991) state that
being visible and showing such care for the school build positive rapport between the principal and the entire school community. This positive rapport assists in helping create a positive principal succession.

Teacher Adjustment

It is clear that the teachers feel positive about the principal succession, and they are adjusting well to Mr. Water, according to three forms of data collected. The teachers are still allowing Mr. Water the necessary adjustment time and are open to his new leadership ideas. As Mrs. Knack states, “usually teachers give that principal a bit of a honeymoon.” This honeymoon period is typical in the succession process (Hart, 1991; Jones & Webber, 2001; McMillan 1993), and it helps teachers feel that there is a team approach toward adjusting to the succession. Also, the teachers’ surveys and teacher interviews show that the staff was ready for and still accept the change in leadership. Researchers (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hart 1991) see such a willingness to accept change as another as pivotal to the success of a transition of leadership in a school. Taken together, these actions aid in decreasing the possibility of resentment building up toward Mr. Water, and increased the chances that the teachers would adjust well to the new leader.

Other contributing factors that produce the teachers’ positive feelings about the succession and adjustment process is Mr. Waters’ ability to listen to teachers, work long hours, show support for teachers’ instructional practices, and implement new academic and social programs for the school. Teachers appreciate and have respect for the utilization of these strategies by Mr. Water because they demonstrate his care for school environment and a high degree of professionalism. This allows teachers to perceive the principal as an ally in the education of students, and that the improvement of the school is at the center of all his decisions.
The result supports the commonly held idea that that teachers appreciate and value their leader more when he or she is perceived as working hard, and making decisions for the betterment of everyone at the school.

Resentment and displeasure with the succession process and the principal, which are common during the succession process (Hart, 1991), did not develop because the teachers indicated they were pleased with how Mr. Water led the school.

The teachers did point out some of Mr. Water’s weakness as a leader after he had been at his position for six months. The weakness include focusing too much of his energy on the middle school, not understanding district procedures, a lack school committee meetings. Although these weaknesses did not affect the overall perception of the positive teacher adjustment and are typical of teacher adjustment during principal succession (Jones & Webber, 2001), they show that not all teachers were completely pleased with Mr. Water. Also, the mentioning of these weaknesses provides evidence that staff may be starting to enter the disillusionment phase of the succession process (Jones & Webber, 2001). However, more time and investigation is needed to substantiate if this statement is true.

*Effective Leadership Strategies*

The teachers specifically point out many effective leadership strategies that led to a positive perception of the principal succession process. The strategies that Mr. Water continually employs are (a) listening to and collaborating with the staff of Wildfire Elementary School; (b) establishing and continually reinforcing the educational philosophy of the school; (c) establishing and support new academic and social programs; (d) creating a new discipline policy for the school and consistently enforcing it; and (e) working to establish and maintain the support of the school community. The teacher also point out leadership strategies utilized by Mr. Water
that specially help a first year principal. They are (a) acting as a role model for both staff and students; (b) apologizing for mistakes; and (c) working with district management to protect established programs at the school site.

Researchers support the use of the strategies listed in the above paragraph, (Coutts, Cochran, & Terry, 1997; Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hart, 1991; Kohn, 1998; Lambert 2003; Noonan & Goldman, 1995) and the teachers at Wildfire Elementary School identified them as effective ways to build trust and rapport, show a commitment and a sense of value toward teacher and parent contributions to the school, and set a professional but compassionate tone for everyone at the school site. Teachers view these strategies as ways to focus themselves and the students of the goal of maximizing learning opportunities. All of this results in the perception of an effectively managed school, where teachers, parents, and students understand their roles and responsibilities. The teachers feel that Mr. Water combined these strategies to make the principal succession process successful.

Pace of Change

The teachers consider the pace of change to the vision and programs of Wildfire Elementary School as slow and measured. They also feel that if changes do take place, they happen for the betterment of the students and make the school a more effective and stable place to learn. Davidson and Taylor (1999) state that creating a sense that new change improves the school environment assist any principal as he or she takes over as leader.

Teacher interviews comments make it clear that teachers believe the slow pace of change happened because of a lack of time in school year for the principal to implement all the his desired changes. The teachers indicate, through many of the teacher interview and survey comments, that making an effort to slowly change the school aids a first year principal in the
transition of leadership because it validates previous practices in the school, builds a sense of collaboration between the teachers and principal, and helps the teachers feel comfortable with their new leader. For example, Mrs. White stated, “We expressed and communicated well to him the things we wanted to keep the same and the things we wanted to change. He has been very receptive, towards input, and I think teachers have been very open.”

Research supports the teachers’ perceptions about the need to validate previous practice (Hart, 1991; McMillan, 1993), to promote building a collaboration between the staff and the principal (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004), and to support administrators who try to create a sense of comfort between teachers and the school leader (Hart, 1991; Jones and Webber, 2001).

Affect of High SES on Decisions

The teachers’ perception about the affect that the high SES on the decision making process of the principal did not change throughout the study. The teachers recognize that the principal did resist what the teachers considered negative pressure exerted by the parents. However, the second grade teacher’s October survey comments and Mrs. French’s interview comments suggest that the money and resources that high SES parents provide necessitates that the principal find a balance between the positive and negative influences of a high SES parent population on the decisions made at the school. Kohn (1998) and Lambert (2003) convey that finding this balance assists any administrator in effective managing a high SES school. Ultimately, the teachers of Wildfire Elementary School point out the resources the parents provide assist the school in achieving its academic goals.

Effective Succession Strategies
Final conclusions for the three research questions of the study emerge from information detailed in the Results section, as well as from the discussion of the five themes above.

From the teachers’ perspective, an incoming administrator can implement a number of effective strategies to create a positive transition of leadership. First, setting a clear and direct expectations, presenting a clear discipline plan to all those within the school community, and being consistent with philosophy and discipline helps to make the succession process positive. This follows Hart’s (1991) conclusions that stated the need of new administrators to set clear expectations, and Hargraves and Fink (2004) who found that new administrators need to focus on social justice issues. The teachers and students of Wildfire Elementary School understand what is expected of them, and see the principal as fair and consistent. Using this strategy, any principal can reduce possible resentment, resulting from ambiguity and inconsistency, from building when he or she takes over a new school.

Second, establishing a positive rapport with the students aids in the transition of leadership. Teachers recognize that Mr. Water takes an active interest in and cares about the students through the establishment of new programs, such as the ski club, and by making sure students are aware of behavioral expectations. The success of this strategy is supported by Fullan (2002) who advocates building rapport with the entire school community as a way effectively lead. It is reasonable to assume that when school administrators reach out to the students, the teachers perceive this as tangible evidence that they care about the school environment and the overall development of the students. Administrators, new to a school, can use this strategy to build rapport with the school community and increase their chances of a positive principal succession.
Third, Mr. Water makes every effort to accept input from parents and teachers before making major decisions. Research (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) supports implementing this strategy because creates a sense of fairness, inclusion, and shared leadership. Soliciting input from the school community is essential to success of the principal succession process at Wildfire Elementary School. Teachers perceive that they are appreciated and that decisions made at the school result from collaboration between the principal and the staff. The appreciation creates a sense of teamwork and helps to bring about the teachers’ perception of comfort with Mr. Water. It is wise for any administrator to make sure that collaborative input is a pillar of his or her leadership philosophy.

Fourth, the importance of keeping the school community informed is an important strategy for success. When the community of Wildfire Elementary School is supplied with information, its members feel collectively at ease and appreciated. This strategy enhances the relationship between a leader and his staff (Fullan, 2002). Resentment and anxiety does not build up, and the succession process continues to progress positively. Administrators should note that when they keep a school community informed about issues that affect the school it lessens chance that the community will perceive the principal as an ineffective leader (Lambert, 2003).

Fifth, by making sure that Wildfire Elementary School ran efficiently, with few disruptions in the established routine of the school, Mr. Water puts teachers at ease with the change in leadership. Mr. Water only created a few new programs and tires to enhance other previously established programs at the school. This action validates the previous practices of the school, and reduces the stress of the succession process. Teachers perceive that they are able to focus of the task of teaching. Davidson and Taylor (1999), Jones and Webber (2001), and McMillan (1993) see running a school efficiently with few disruptions in the programs offered at
the school as one of the many keys to reducing the stress of and producing a successful principal transition. It is clear from the study, that when teachers focus on their primary responsibility of teaching, they feel that the succession process occurs positively.

Sixth, the ability to interact with teachers openly, honestly, and fairly assists in establishing credibility and support between Mr. Water and the staff. Much of the established research (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Noonan and Goldman, 1995) emphasizes the use of this strategy as a way to effectively manage a school site. It is the reasonable to assume that when an administrator takes over that he or she should utilize this strategy to build an effective school management plan and produce a positive principal succession.

Seventh, by not allowing parents and PTA members to negatively influence the decision making process, teachers at Wildfire Elementary School identify the principal as a strong leader who can make decisions that would benefit the entire school community. Kohn (1998) supports this strategy because he states that effective leaders in high SES should determine legitimate parent concerns and resist negative pressure. A principal should implement this strategy when taking over a school because it prohibits any negative impacts on decisions made and builds the teachers’ belief that the new principal is the leader of the school.

Eighth, following the research of Davidson and Taylor (1999) is was important that Mr. Water continues to demonstrate a high degree of energy and a desire to improve the school. Through this, teachers perceive the principal as a partner in the improvement of the school, and that a desire to improve is at the center of all his decisions. Teachers appreciate and value their leader more when they perceive him or her as a tireless worker who continually strives to improve the school (Davidson & Taylor, 1999).
Ninth, visibility and accessibility are keys for success during the transition process. The teachers of Wildfire Elementary School appreciate the fact that the principal is always present and available to handle conflicts, questions, and concerns. It reaffirms to both the teachers and the students that Mr. Water is the leader of the school. Research (Fullan, 2002; Hart, 1991; Jones & Webber 2001; Noonan & Goldman, 1995) supports that when teachers see the principal as the affirmed and effective leader of the school they are more willing to accept change. It would be wise, then, for any succession principal to be present on campus during the first year of a leadership transition.

Tenth, acting as a role model to both teachers and students allows teachers to see the principal as the leader in the changing culture of the school. Fullan (2002) asserts that when principals think and act as a cultural leader it brings about a positive transition of power and a more effectively run organization. Through the role modeling of Mr. Water, the teachers and students understand what is expected of them, and this reduces the stress of the succession process. An administrator, new to a school, might use this strategy as a part of an effective plan to implement his or her educational philosophy and vision at the school.

Lastly, teachers recognize that Mr. Water provides a high degree of support for them when issues with parents arise. The strategy of providing teachers with support has a positive effective on the relationship between the teachers and the principal (Noonan & Goldman, 1995). Positive relationships between administrators and teachers helps a school function more effectively (Hart, 1991). As stated previously, the more effectively a school is run, the greater the chance of a positive transition of leadership (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Jones and Webber 2001; McMillan, 1993). Thus, any succession principal should employ this strategy to increase the probability of a positive principal succession.
Strategies for First Year Principals

It is advisable for every first year administrator to utilize the strategies detailed above to assist in the principal succession process. However, the results of the study showcase other strategies that the teachers perceive a first year administrator can employ to provide for a greater possibility of positive principal succession.

First, a new principal should establish his or her philosophy of education and intertwine it with the school’s established vision. Mr. Water set forth his philosophy during the first staff meeting and reaffirmed it during subsequently student assemblies. This action is important because it validates previous established programs, and provides an opportunity for Mr. Water to institute necessary changes to the direction of the school. Both Davidson and Taylor (1999) and McMillan (1993) view this strategy as an effective way to lead a school. It is wise, then, for a first year administrator to determine how he or she can merge their educational philosophy with the vision of their new school.

Second, a first year administrator may want to reorganize the discipline policy of a school as he or she begins to the new post as leader. Mr. Water’s reorganization the discipline policy makes students fully aware of behavioral expectations and continues to assist in establishing Mr. Water as the leader of the school, according to teacher perception. Being seen as the affirmed leader and clearly communicating behavioral expectation to the school community helps a principal to make the changes and assists in producing a positive principal succession (Fullan, 2002; Hart, 1991; Jones & Webber 2001; Noonan & Goldman, 1995). Also, the results of the study show the consistent enforce of consequences for student misbehavior builds trust between the principal and the teachers. The teachers feel that Mr. Water helps them to focus more on teaching because he consistently enforces the discipline policy of the school. With these potential
benefits, a new principal should examine his or her school’s current discipline policy to determine if he or she can utilize it effectively to handle discipline issues at the school.

Third, Mr. Water establishes credibility and support with the teachers when he promotes new programs that support student learning, such as the fourth and fifth grade intervention hour. As the desire to continue the full day kindergarten program shows, Mr. Water also establishes credibility through continual support for previously established school programs during his meeting with district level officials. McMillan (1993) views promoting new programs as effective because it creates healthy creative tension. At the same time, supporting established long-range learning goals builds on sustained and established programs at the school and helps to ensure a positive principal succession (Hart, 1991; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004). It is wise then for a first year administrator to determine one or two programs to implement at the school in the initial year of leadership, and provide support for educationally valuable programs already established at the school.

Fourth, teachers perceive Mr. Water’s refocusing of this school’s vision as a positive strategy. In their view, it legitimizes the work previously done at the school, but allows for teachers to provide input to help shape the future direction of the school. Fullan (2002), Hargreaves and Fink (2004), Hart (1991), and McMillan (1993) see legitimizing previous practice and accepting staff input way to create a positive transition of leadership. A first year administrator may then want to change the part of the school’s vision as a way to build a sense of shared leadership in the school.

Fifth, apologizing for mistakes is an effective strategy used by Mr. Water. The teachers see this as a strength and positive personal characteristic that makes Mr. Water more personable and builds a positive relationship between him and the staff. Again, research (Jones and Webber,
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2001; Noonan & Goldman 1995) supports the building of positive relationship between school administration and staff. It may be difficult to do, but when teachers see administrators apologizing, they seem to realize that effective leaders seek forgiveness for errors in leadership.

Lastly, a new administrator should not show favoritism to any program within the school. One of the few negative perceptions derived from the study is the belief that Mr. Water focuses too heavily on the middle school concerns. Teachers feel as though too much time and resources are diverted to the middle school, and this causes slight resentment. Research conveys (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, Noonan and Goldman, 1995) that not being fair tends to erode the credibility of the principal and develops resentment of the leader within the staff. Even if a first year principal is directed by his superiors to focus on a particular program, it may be prudent to split available resources, time, and effort between all programs during the first year of leadership. By doing this, a new administrators will reduce the possibility or resentment of his or her leadership within the staff.

Teachers’ Thoughts and Feelings

The teachers felt extremely positive with the principal succession, and they also believe that they have adjusted well to the new leader. All but of teacher involved in the study, express that they like new principal, and feel that he is effectively leading the school. The teachers also assist in the transition of leadership by giving the principal the time and support he needs to assimilate into the school community. This allows Mr. Water the time he needs to become an effective orchestrator of resources at the school. Noonan and Goldman (1995) state this ability as the primary function of any effective school principal. Also, the teachers were ready for the succession, and this allows them to be more objective and open to change (Jones & Webber, 2001). One of the factors that contributing to the positive perception of the transition of
leadership may be the fact Mr. Water comes from outside the district of Wildfire Elementary School. As Lagore and Parker (1997) point out, teachers experiencing a transition of leadership are more ready and expect change if their new principal comes from outside the district.

The study also supports the idea that the success of teacher adjustment to a principal succession is based on a collaborative effort between the teachers and the new principal (Jones and Webber, 2001). The teachers should give a new principal time to adjust and be open to implementing his or her suggestions to improve the school. The new school administrator must also utilize many leadership strategies to effectively lead the school and build a positive relationship with the staff. All this takes place at Wildfire Elementary School. As a result, the teachers feel the succession process is happening positively because the teachers and principal work together to ensure that its success.

On Jones and Webber’s (2001) scale, the teachers of Wildfire Elementary School land in the enchantment phase of the principal succession process. The enchantment phase is characterized by feeling positive about the leader, looking forward to his or her changes, and allowing the principal adjustment time. All results indicate that the teachers feel this way. Also, Mr. Water used many effective leadership strategies to bring and keep the teachers in the enchantment phase. These strategies include, but are not limited to, listening to and communicating with the school community, reestablishing the vision of the school, and showing much energy and interest in school program.

The fact that teachers identify some of Mr. Water’s weaknesses as a leader pointed out the possibility that the teachers may be beginning to enter the disillusionment phase (Jones & Webber, 2001), where teachers begin to question the leader and his or her decisions.
More time is ultimately needed to observe when and how the teachers will progress through the stages of leadership transition. When Mr. Water begins to make decisions that fundamentally change established programs and routines, resentment and disillusionment may begin (Jones & Webber, 2001; Hart, 1991). Mr. Water and any new administrator might utilize the Effective Schools Climate Inventory that Coutts, Cochran, and Terry (1997) advocate. By using this survey, principals can judge how the teachers perceive the succession process.

From the study, every administrator should realize that teacher’s progress through defined stages in the succession process. It is prudent for a succession principal to use staff development time or staff meetings at the school site to make teachers aware of these stages, and discuss how they can work together to move more quickly to the final stage that Hart (1991) describes as stabilization, where teachers and the principal compromised and come to a professional understanding of how to run the school effectively.

The coming of a new leader could not significantly alter the teachers’ attitude that the high SES parents of Wildfire Elementary School influenced decisions. Mr. Water utilizes many effective strategies, such as treating people equally (Kohn, 1998), not changing decisions because of negative pressure (Kohn, 1998), not being afraid to make controversial decisions (McMillan, 1993), and meeting regularly with parents (Lambert, 2003), to lessen the influence of parents. Still, teachers perceive that the high SES of the school as had an impact on the school.

Teachers perceive this influence as mostly positive, however. The teachers believe the parents provide Wildfire Elementary School with many educational resources and additional programs. What is important for a succession principal who takes over a high SES school to realize is that high SES parental influence can be a positive for the school. However, as
principal, he or she must create a balance between the negative of parental pressure and positive of obtaining resources from parents (Kohn, 1998).

*Implications of the Study*

Any administrator taking over a new school should look to the example of Wildfire Elementary School to assist in a successful transition of school leadership. There are numerous strategies that any administrator coming to a new school can implement to increase the likelihood of a successful transition of power. The study does validate many previously researched strategies, such as listening to the input of the school community. Also, the study brings to light some new strategies, such as learning to apologize for mistakes that administrators can use to create a successful transition of leadership. First year administrators should pay particular attention to the strategies detailed throughout the study. The strategies discussed provide insight to what helps any new principal to create a positive principal succession. Most importantly, as a result of this study, the looking glass or lens through which teachers perceive the succession process is more clearly defined. The thoughts and feelings of teachers as the progressed through the succession process are more apparent and understandable. Wildfire Elementary School’s succession process is positive because teachers are willing to accept the change, and the new principal is open, fair, honest, and truly valued the teachers’ opinions and work. Any school administrator can utilize the information in this descriptive study to become a more effective school leader.

Teachers experiencing a principal succession can benefit from the results of this study as well. They can apply the information found in the study to better understand the succession process and work with their new administrator to bring about a positive transition of leader.
References


North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (n.d.). *Socioeconomic status.* Retrieved April 1, 2007 from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/earlycld/ea7lk5.htm


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Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1 – Median income of communities with students attending Wildfire Elementary School compared the county and the nation.

(City of Camarillo - Demographics, 2006; City of Moorpark - Population, Income, Education, and Housing, n.d; City of Thousand Oaks - Demographics, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau - Historical Income Tables - Households, 2007)
Figure 2 – Average scores obtained for each question in October

Figure 3 – Average score obtained for each question in February
Figure 4 – Combined teacher survey scores derived from averaging scores for October and February surveys.
Table 1

*Interviewed teachers and their experiences in teaching and succession*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Number of School Employed</th>
<th>Number of Principal Successions</th>
<th>Current Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Knack</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Melody</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. French</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Forms of Data Collected at Wildfire Elementary School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>10/15/06 to 10/31/06 and 2/14/07 to 2/28/07</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Comments</td>
<td>10/15/06 to 10/31/06 and 2/14/07 to 2/28/07</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Interviews</td>
<td>10/15/06 to 10/31/06 and 2/14/07 to 2/28/07</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Survey

**Succession Survey Wildfire Elementary School**

*Please note that this survey is for academic purposes only, and will only be reviewed by its writer.

*Directions: Please circle the answer that best fits your feelings about each question. Please add comments in the boxes below the question if you wish to add explanation to your answer. SD= Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N=Neutral; A= Agree; SA= Strongly Agree*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The new principal has been an effective leader for the school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>The school community supports our principal.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The principal has made important and valuable changes to school’s vision and focus.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I’m comfortable with the new principal.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>The principal collaborates with the staff members to help the school function and assure a smooth transition.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>The principal listens to the school community (parents, students, and teachers) to help the school function and assure a smooth transition.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Overall, the high socio-economic status of this school affects the way the decisions are made at the school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SA</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The new principal has kept the status quo and not made changes too quickly.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The new principal brought in new ideas and concepts that will be beneficial to the school.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SA</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall, the school is experiencing a positive principal transition.</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SA</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Comments:</td>
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</table>
Appendix D: Questionnaires

Teacher Questions – October Interviews

1. How much contact have you had with the new principal? What are your initial impressions?

Possible Probes

- What factors have affected your contact with the principal?
- What gave you this impression?

2. How effective do you feel our principal is? What are his strengths and weaknesses?

Possible Probes

- How do you define effectiveness?
- When do the strength and weaknesses appear?

3. How has the principal’s personality fit with the school community? What, if anything can be improved?

Possible Probes

- What personality type would you characterize the principal as? Why?
- What factors within the community have affected the principal’s transition into the school?

4. How well do you feel the succession process has been? How well is the school adjusting to the new leader?

Possible Probes

- What decisions have influenced your feelings?
- What have you heard from other teachers about the new leader?

5. What are some of your hopes and fears as the new principal continues in his role? Why?
6. How has the high SES status of the community affected the principal runs the school?

What are positives? What are negatives?

Possible Probes

- Any examples you can give?
- Does the principal support the teachers in his dealings with parents? Why?

7. How has the school community (teachers, parents, and students) helped the new principal succeed? Examples?

8. What are the one or two most pressing issues in the school that you would like to see change?

Possible Probes

- Why?
- What can the principal do to solve these problems?
- Do you think he will?

9. Is there any way that you would like to see how decisions are made changed? Why?
Teacher Interview Questions - February

1. How much contact have you had with the new principal? Has your initial impression of him changed?

2. Possible Probes
   - What factors have affected your contact with the principal?
   - What happened to change your impression?

3. How effective do you feel our principal is? What are his strengths and weaknesses?

4. Possible Probes
   - How do you define effectiveness?
   - What specific strategies has he used to promote a positive transition?

5. How has the principal’s personality fit with the school community? What, if anything can be improved?

6. Possible Probes
   - What personality type would you characterize the principal as? Why
   - What strategies has he used to fit in with the school community?
   - What factors within the community have affected the principal’s transition into the school?

7. How well do you feel the succession process has been? How well is the school adjusting to the new leader?

8. Possible Probes
   - What decisions have influenced your feelings? Why?
   - What have you heard from other teachers about the new leader?

9. What are some of your hopes and fears as the new principal continues in his role for the rest of this year as well as next year? Why?
10. How has the high SES status of the community affected the principal running the school? What are positives? What are negatives?

11. **Possible Probes**
   - Any examples you can give?
   - Does the principal support the teachers in his dealings with parents? Why?

12. How has the school community (teachers, parents, and students) helped the new principal succeed? Has he used any techniques to make this happen? Examples?

13. What are the one or two most pressing issues in the school that you would like to see change?

14. **Possible Probes**
   - Why?
   - What can the principal do to solve these problems?
   - Do you think he will?

15. Is there any way that you would like to see how decisions are made changed? Why?

16. Is there anything that has surprised about this principal transition?