

Evaluation, Supervision, and Staff Development under Mandated Reform: The Perceptions and Practices of Rural Middle School Principals

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The perspectives of three rural middle school principals as they implement Georgia's A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000 were investigated in this study. A case study approach was used, employing both within case and cross case analyses. Three interviews were conducted with each of the three participants, resulting in a total of nine interviews. Five perspectives emerged from the data: (1) Evaluation of teacher effectiveness can be indicated only by the results of standardized tests, (2) Supervision consists of classroom visits and observations, (3) Ruralness affects how staff development is delivered, (4) Lack of funding limits the effectiveness of the staff development component of teacher evaluation, and (5) Implementation of A Plus adversely affects the traditional middle school schedule.

Former Georgia Governor Roy Barnes's *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*, House Bill 1187, was met with concerns from teachers and administrators in Georgia public schools (Jacobson, 2001). After more than a decade under the Quality Basic Education Act, educators faced a new roadmap for school improvement. Much of the responsibility for implementation of the *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000* (hereafter referred to as *A Plus*) rested with administrative personnel, most notably principals, responsible for the supervision, evaluation, and staff development of all certified staff. Although *A Plus* was amended in 2003, the teacher evaluation mandates remain. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives and practices of three rural middle school principals who, by state statute, were mandated to implement the teacher evaluation provisions of the bill.

A Plus's reforms include accountability—specifically, teacher accountability. *A Plus* provided that a teacher receiving an unsatisfactory evaluation would not be entitled to a salary increase based on credit for years of experience. *A Plus* required that:

The placement of teachers on the salary schedule shall be based on certificate level and years of creditable experience, except that a teacher shall not receive credit for any year of experience in which the teacher received an unsatisfactory performance evaluation. (O. C. G. A. §20-2-212 (a))

Additionally, teachers receiving two unsatisfactory annual performance evaluations in the previous five-year period would not be re-certified until the perceived deficiency was remediated. To wit:

An individual who has received two unsatisfactory annual performance

evaluations in the previous five-year period pursuant to Code Section 20-2-210 shall not be entitled to a renewable certificate prior to demonstrating that such performance deficiency has been satisfactorily addressed, but such individual may apply to the commission for a nonrenewable certificate. (O. C. G. A. §20-2-200 (c))

In the past, the Georgia Teacher Evaluation Program (GTEP) was used throughout the state. Administrators were required to receive state-approved training on the evaluation instrument. While school systems are no longer required to use GTEP, some systems opt to use GTEP with the addition of the following minimal considerations of the statute:

1. The role of the teacher in meeting the school's student achievement goals, including the academic gains of students assigned to the teacher;
2. Observations of the teacher by the principal and assistant principals during the delivery of instruction and at other times as appropriate;
3. Participation in professional development opportunities and the application of concepts learned to classroom and school activities;
4. Communication and interpersonal skills as they relate to interaction with students, parents, other teachers, administrators, and other school personnel;
5. Timeliness and attendance for assigned responsibilities;
6. Adherence to school and local school system procedures and rules; and,
7. Personal conduct while in performance of school duties. (O.C.G. A. §20-2-210 (b))

A change in the state-required evaluation of teachers was the provision requiring the consideration of “academic gains of students assigned to the teacher” as a component of the teacher’s evaluation. Student achievement is determined through a number of assessments, including norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests. This component elevated student assessment to a high-stakes area because continued teacher certification can now be linked to student performance on assessments in core academic areas.

The nature of middle schools, however, made this mandate especially difficult for middle school principals to implement. Middle schools offer exploratory or non-core academic classes and now middle school principals are “forced to fit” evaluating exploratory, non-core academic teachers the same as academic core teachers.

Rural Schools

Chance (1993) bemoaned the fact that often legislation is passed and policy developed without full knowledge of the ramifications on rural schools. The educational reform movement, according to Chance, is an example of a phenomenon that produces unintended consequences. “The burden of compliance and the costs have been and will continue to be felt by the rural/small schools because of their size, isolation, and limited finances to implement required mandates” (p. 26).

Mandated reform initiatives are more costly to rural school districts than to non-rural districts. There has been debate on whether rural districts need the same types of reform initiatives as other, non-rural districts (Chance, 1993; Lewis, 1992). The “one size fits all” mentality may have deleterious effects on rural schools. Results of a study of mandated reforms in rural Kentucky conducted by Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, and Reeves (1999) raised the question: “[w]hether it is possible or prudent to induce all schools, whether urban, suburban, or rural, to adopt certain tenets of a systemic reform movement that are purported to be crucial to the welfare of the nation” (p. 13).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives and practices of three rural middle school principals about instructional supervision, staff development, and teacher evaluation while implementing the evaluative provisions of *A Plus*. We sought to answer several questions about the work of principals to supervise, evaluate, and provide professional development for teachers given the provisions of *A Plus*. More specifically, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did rural middle school principals perceive supervision as a result of the implementation of the *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*?
2. How did these perspectives affect supervisory practices?
3. How did rural middle school principals perceive changes in teacher evaluation as a result of the

implementation of the *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*?

4. How did these perspectives affect evaluative practices?
5. What contextual factors influenced the evaluative and supervisory practices of rural middle school principals?

Because our purposes were to answer “how and why,” we used a qualitative case study to understand the supervisory and evaluative perspectives of three rural middle school principals (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1984). We attempted to “fence in” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) three separate cases as a single bounded case—not to test a hypothesis regarding the phenomenon, but to understand, describe, and interpret the phenomenon. During a seven-month period, three interviews were conducted with each of the three rural middle school principals who worked in three different school systems in Georgia. Artifacts and extensive fieldnotes were collected from each school.

Following a criterion-based selection process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), we created “a list of the attributes essential,” and then we proceeded “to find or locate a unit matching the list” (p. 70). We wanted middle school principals with two or more years of experience at their present schools located in districts that had a total enrollment of less than 5,000 students located 60 or more miles away from a major metropolitan area. We browsed the Georgia Department of Education’s website to skim data from schools classified as rural, and next we visited specific school websites for information such as enrollment. We then chose five possible sites within a two-hour drive. Two sites were eliminated because the principals were in their first year.

Nine interviews were conducted, yielding approximately 25 hours of transcript data. Interviews were audiotape-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. We took notes during the interviews, and the contents of the transcripts provided the content for subsequent interviews. Semi-structured interview protocols were used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Participants were asked questions such as “How do you evaluate teachers?” “What do you think supervision is?” and “How has implementation of *A Plus* affected your role as supervisor?” Open-ended questions included, “How are you going to use test scores with band or chorus teachers?” and “Tell me what you know about the evaluative mandates of the *A Plus Education Reform Act*.” After the initial interviews, more structured interviews focused on topics that emerged during the initial interview. For example, to understand how staff development was conducted at the three schools, we asked, “How are staff development opportunities determined at your school?” An interim analysis of the principals’ responses to each interview yielded additional questions, which required both explanations and examples. Pseudonyms were used for the names of schools, colleges, and individuals.

The principals of Heritage Middle School in southwest Georgia, Manning Middle School in South Georgia, and Boyd Middle School in Central Georgia were chosen. Heritage County School System posted an enrollment of 4800 students, employed 382 teachers, and is 65 miles from a major metropolitan area. Manning County School System had an enrollment of 2800 students, employed 195 teachers and is also 65 miles from a major metropolitan area. Finally, Boyd County School System had an enrollment of 3200 students, employed 202 teachers and is 60 miles from a major metropolitan area.

Principal 1 of Heritage Middle School had been a classroom teacher for 5 years and a principal for 7 years, and Principal 2 of Manning County Middle School served 19 years as a classroom teacher and 7 years as a principal. Principal 3 of Boyd Middle School was a classroom teacher for 19 years and had completed 8 years as a principal.

Data Analysis

In this study, two stages of analyses were conducted: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Each case was treated as a comprehensive, contextual unit. Themes that emerged from each interview were noted and summarized to facilitate the within-case analyses. After the within-case analyses were completed, cross-case analysis began. Analyses were conducted during the data collection phase of the study and between interviews. In cross-case analysis, the researcher attempts “to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details” (Yin, 1994, p. 112). Analyzing data in this manner led to the generation of categories and then themes.

Data were collected from multiple sources to triangulate data. In addition to participant interviews, the researchers obtained artifacts from each participant and school district webpage. The artifacts included school improvement plans, observation checklists, and teacher feedback forms. These documents were examined and coded. The three-interview structure was also a means of establishing validity. Per Seidman’s (1998) model, internal consistency was achieved by spacing the interviews over a one-to-two month period, placing participants’ comments in context, and including the same points of focus in each interview. The three-interview format provided data triangulation in terms of content, time, and subject.

Member checks were conducted throughout the duration of the study (Merriam, 1998). Participants were mailed transcripts of each interview and the researchers’ interpretations of the interviews. They were invited to comment on the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations prior to subsequent interviews. None of the participants commented on the interview transcripts and interpretations prior to the subsequent interviews. However, immediately before each interview, participants were invited again to comment. Participants had reflected on their previous interviews and each participant added comments.

After transcribing audio-taped interviews, data were coded, categorized, and analyzed to note themes.

Findings

Supervision—Perspectives and Practices

Two of the principals expressed that supervision consisted of evaluative observations and classroom visits. One of these two principals defined supervision as “supervising all of the programs, monitoring the total operation of the school.” Another principal shared his thoughts on the meaning of supervision as the ability to have a vision about a job or a directive that has been given to you, and being able to accomplish that by either persuading other people who are working with you or by directing people who are working with you to follow the same vision and accomplish the same goal.

This principal discussed his supervisory practices before *A Plus* as being mostly managerial consisting of “checking lesson plans” and evaluative classroom visits.

He described the changes that *A Plus* made in his supervisory practices as “making sure that I’m seeing teaching.” At the same time, with *A Plus*, “I’m asking myself if the students will be tested on what the teacher is teaching.” In practice, supervision and evaluation are synonymous for both of these principals. Supervision occurred within evaluation; evaluation occurred within supervision.

The other principal in the study expressed that supervision consisted not only of non-evaluative and evaluative classroom observations, but also staff development and mentoring. She described the process as iterative, including goal setting, teacher evaluation, observation, and staff development.

Two of the principals facilitated staff development opportunities based solely on the needs of the teachers. One principal used funds for attendance at off-site conferences and other activities, as well as for payment of outside “experts” who provided one-shot staff development activities. While this principal employed a staff development committee, she was the sole determiner of staff development needs for her faculty.

One principal detailed a structured and purposeful staff development plan with opportunities based on school and system goals. This principal facilitated staff development by collaborating with a state university that agreed to provide advanced course work to teachers at the school site. Consequently, teachers at this school did not have to commute three to four hours to the closest university to obtain advanced degrees. The principal also provided on-site technology training through a grant. While this principal acknowledged the benefits of off-site staff development, she noted that there were “few affordable opportunities for teachers to attend conferences and other off-site activities.” She envisioned a professional

development school with activities abounding at the school site. A mentoring/peer coaching program developed by the principal and the leadership team was also a component of supervision. Each of the principals bemoaned the lack of funding for staff development, but only one principal reported pursuing funding from other sources beyond the funds allocated by the system.

Evaluation—Perspectives and Practices

Each of the principals struggled with the definitions of evaluation provided in the *A Plus* legislation, and one principal reported a change in evaluative practices. At his school, grade level chairpersons were trained to use the Georgia Teacher Evaluation Program (GTEP), but he did not use the chairpersons in formal evaluation procedures. The assistant principal at this school focused on instructional assistance to teachers. The principal reported that with the adoption of *A Plus*, grade level chairpersons no longer conducted formal evaluations. He explained that the grade level chairs “do some informal evaluations. They used to do formal evaluations before the *A Plus* thing came into effect. Some of them didn’t really want to tell their peers what was what, so we stopped that.”

Each of the principals believed that standardized test scores should be the measure of the “school’s student achievement goals, including the academic gains of students assigned to the teacher” (O.C.G.A. §20-2-210 (b)). To the contrary, the legislation affords that:

In making a determination of the academic gains of the students assigned to a teacher, evaluators should make every effort to have available and to utilize the results of a wide range of student achievement assessments, including those utilized by the teacher, set by the local board of education, or required under this article. (O.C.G.A. §20-2-210 (c))

Each of the principals intended to use results from the state’s criterion-referenced tests for teachers of the grades tested (for the purposes of middle schools, eighth grade) and other standardized measures for teachers of those grades that do not participate in criterion-referenced testing. The principals were in agreement that all teachers should have standardized test results attached to their evaluations as a measure of student achievement.

The principals, however, expressed concern that evaluation of Connections or exploratory teachers who do not teach core/tested subjects such as fine arts, technology, or physical education would be problematic. Two principals believed it was unfair and “practically” impossible to hold Connections teachers responsible for achievement in core areas. Conversely, one principal shared that it was fair for accountability purposes, and it was possible to hold Connections teachers responsible for student achievement in

core areas because at her school, all teachers teach reading. From her perspective, if Connections teachers were properly trained to teach reading through appropriate staff development, they should be held accountable for student achievement in that area. From this principal’s perspective, staff development is a complimentary component of teacher evaluation.

The Context of the Middle School—Perspectives and Practices

Each of the principals expressed concerns about how the evaluative mandates of the *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000* impacted teachers at the middle school level. Each principal reported encountering difficulties when evaluating “the role of the teacher in meeting the school’s student achievement goals, including the academic gains of students assigned to the teacher” (O.C.G. A. §20-2-210 (b)). This factor was problematic because middle school principals are required to evaluate core academic and exploratory (Connections) teachers consistently. Connections classes include band, chorus, consumer science, physical education, art, technology applications, and other classes which may be particular to the school community. One principal expressed her concerns as “. . . There is no standardized test for that. . . there is no way to evaluate them.”

Another principal shared that the evaluation of Connections teachers was problematic because of the organizational scheme that most middle schools employ. While core academic teachers teach students over one or more semesters, this principal noted that Connections teachers usually did not. Even though this principal acknowledged that he would use “the regular state instrument, along with some county-made instrument,” he did not provide us with a copy of either instrument. His main concern was how he would evaluate the academic gains of the students taught by the Connections teachers. “We haven’t decided how we’re going to do that yet. That is a tricky thing to do because students get grades at nine-week intervals because we rotate Connections every nine weeks.” This principal planned to use results of the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests and the Stanford Achievement Test for the purpose of evaluating core academic teachers.

Another principal noted that the school system was proactive in implementing the new evaluative mandates by creating an addendum to the state-sanctioned Georgia Teacher Evaluation Process (GTEP). This principal also noted the difficulty of evaluating Connections teachers in a manner consistent with the evaluation of core academic teachers. She noted that the leadership team of the school had devised a plan for evaluating Connections teachers, but that the process “is a little bit harder because the vein that goes across the school . . . is vocabulary. Vocabulary scores will be for those folks [Connections teachers].” Each principal also reported subtle changes in scheduling to

accommodate *A Plus*. The scheduling changes seem to have been implemented to accommodate the Connections classes. For example, one principal noted that each teacher in the school taught at least one Connections class as a remedy to the scheduling conflicts that the school encountered after the adoption of *A Plus*. She lamented, "Now it's similar to a junior high . . . but we still have them in teams."

Another principal reported similar scheduling conflicts created by the implementation of *A Plus*. This principal noted that, "We're pretty much back to the traditional one-hour per period, or periods all day long, every day like the old junior high days." The decrease in planning time for interdisciplinary teachers precipitated a decrease in instructional time for Connections teachers. This principal observed that Connections teachers changed many of their instructional practices and adapted curricula to conform to the decreased instructional time.

The three principals reported that the impact of ruralness on how *A Plus* was implemented was greater for some rural principals than for others. For example, the principal whose rural community is farthest away from a major metropolitan area explained that *A Plus* disregards geographical differences related to students and to resources. He called the law "a blanket, one-size fits all law."

Staff Development—Perspectives and Practices

One principal explained how the staff, grappling with a previously ineffective block schedule configuration, initiated staff development to maximize the uses of block scheduling. Because this principal's school was over 75 miles away from a college or university, her teachers often experienced difficulty and great expense in availing themselves of further educational opportunities. This principal addressed the problem:

Having a relationship with Benfield College for the last couple of years, we were able to secure college classes here at the school. Every Thursday, there's a college class taught here. That's been a real plus that people can continue their education and just walk down the hall and not have to drive. The ultimate goal is for us to become a staff development school where we have student teachers and a whole cadre of folks and this is our beginning.

Another principal noted that staff development opportunities were "few" at the school site and even in the county. This principal identified the local Regional Educational Services Agency (RESA) as an important source for staff development opportunities, and she noted that few opportunities were offered in-house. She explained that the teachers in her school were often included in staff development "classes" with teachers from nearby school

systems. This required rather extensive travel time for her teachers, but she reported that the travel time was not a negative factor; however, she shared, "staff development needs were not necessarily addressed in a timely manner."

The other principal reported that staff development activities were offered at the "system level" or locally, and some staff development was offered on site. He reported that the administration hired consultants to ensure adequate staff development opportunities. This principal also reported that teachers at his school were empowered to initiate and facilitate on-site staff development, and that he always capitalized on the skills of in-house personnel. He said, "Any time a teacher mentions to us where they see there is a need for staff development or improvement. . . if we can do it ourselves here on site, then we do that in-house."

Each principal reported concerns with staff development funding. One principal related that the redelivery model of staff development was used at her school. She conducted staff development activities, and the assistant principal and teachers who possess certain expertise conduct staff development activities. She explained that this maximized funding.

Another principal noted that his staff often depleted staff development funds, but that additional funds were allocated from local sources to supplement the original allocations. He reported that even though local funds were scarce, central administration "does everything possible" to fund staff development.

At the time of the study, legislative funding for staff development had been cut by one-third, which was a cause for concern for one principal. She expressed that, "They need to pour more funds into staff development. Cuts are being made everywhere, especially in our profession. It's understandable even though it comes at a time when we need more." The other principals reported similar funding dilemmas.

Even though *A Plus* caused supervisory and evaluative difficulties in the three middle schools, each of the principals embraced the Act as a measure of teacher, student and administrative accountability. Each principal tried to make the provisions of *A Plus* operational in their schools; they were willing to "force a fit" in order to comply with the law, and they were optimistic that increased accountability would yield increased student achievement.

Discussion

More often than not, the authors of recent accountability measures have the best interests of students, teachers, and administrators in mind. Problems occur when these authors fail to realize that "one size fits all" accountability measures function like a "one size fits all shirt," fitting some individuals comfortably while other individuals must "force a fit." Such is the case with Georgia's *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*. Seemingly, the evaluative and

supervisory provisions of the Act form a good fit for some schools, but they are problematic for many rural middle schools. Where urban and suburban middle school principals incur difficulty in complying with the evaluative and supervisory provisions of the *Act*, rural middle school principals face the same problems compounded by the nature of their communities and schools.

The goal of supervision in schools should be to assist professional educators in achieving both instructional efficacy and professional growth (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998; Zepeda, 2004). To achieve this goal, supervision should not be an event, but rather a formative process (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000; Zepeda, 2004). The loftiest goals of evaluation should be the same. New accountability measures often confine supervision and evaluation to summative events—administrators visit classrooms and report to teachers the results and value of what they saw. Unfortunately, in the schools involved in this study, this type of event is the most common form of both supervision and evaluation.

The imposition of student test scores as a measure of student achievement removes teacher improvement from the evaluative formula. As one principal in the study noted, “administrators will become more concerned with evaluations as judgments of teacher competency as opposed to evaluations as a tool that facilitates teacher growth and subsequently fosters student growth.” Under *A Plus* and similar accountability mandates, “student achievement” and teacher effectiveness are reduced to one-dimensional, artificial measures that largely fail to account for student and teacher growth.

Supervision and evaluation that is formative in nature provides a basis for teachers to improve instruction. The accountability measures outlined in *A Plus* forced these principals to use summative evaluations, forfeiting much in the formative practice of instructional supervision. Using high stakes test results misplaces value from the acts of teaching and myriad learning moments that these tests cannot always chronicle in a single test result. In the case of *A Plus*, teacher certification and ultimately continued employment hinge on a single measure of student achievement—the results of a test. Rural principals who may not have the necessary staff to consider other measures of student achievement for teacher evaluation may employ the easiest and most readily available measures—state-mandated standardized tests. Communities, even rural ones, have been conditioned by the national media to expect analysis and utilization of standardized tests to assign value to their schools, the teachers in their schools, and to their administrators (Allen, 2000).

What happens when the new accountability measures such as *A Plus* are implemented in the context of rural middle schools? All school systems are pressed to hire and retain “highly qualified” teachers even as state departments of education struggle to define “highly qualified” (Cornett & Bailey, 2003; Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003). Historically,

rural schools have incurred difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers. Rural schools are in remote areas and can offer only low base salaries with little or no supplementary compensation (Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003; Simmons, 2005). Based on the results of this study, rural teachers are most often required to teach several courses as well as supervise one or more extra-curricular activities. Additionally, rural students provide a different type of challenge than students in more urban surroundings, and school conditions are not always optimal (Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003; Simmons, 2005). When experienced teachers are dismissed on the basis of unsatisfactory evaluations and inadequate supervision and staff development, they are difficult to replace. Younger and less experienced teachers hesitate to seek employment in rural areas where student test scores are not optimal and where they may experience professional, social, and cultural isolation (Simmons, 2005). An unintended consequence of “one size fits all” accountability measures might intensify the recruitment-retention dilemma for rural administrators.

Lack of adequate staff development compounds the complexity of recruitment and retention for rural administrators. Based on what these principals shared, *A Plus* has impacted both the concept of middle school scheduling and staff development practices. Staff development is an important component of supervision, and each principal noted difficulty implementing staff development for their teachers. Principals desire to provide staff development, but because school funding is based on enrollment and attendance, rural and small schools receive less staff development funding than non-rural schools. The principals in this study reported differing levels of creativity to provide ample staff development opportunities. Because many rural schools are not close to academic communities, administrators encounter great expense in providing “expert” consultation and in sending teachers to other sites for staff development. In short, the principals in this study reported that they did not have the financial wherewithal to ensure that teachers received varied staff development opportunities, further complicating supervisory duties of rural principals.

Because of size, rural and small schools often employ fewer administrators than their urban and suburban counterparts. Much of the time, a single administrator must adequately supervise staff, evaluate staff, and provide staff development. *A Plus* required principals to assume numerous tasks and added new responsibilities; the participants in this study found themselves with “more to do and less to do it with.”

With the intense focus on core academics, teachers of non-academic courses might suffer unintended consequences because of the “forced fit” where all teachers, even the ones not responsible for instruction in core subject areas, might be evaluated the same as teachers who are teaching in core subjects. The principals in this study wanted to evaluate all teachers equitably, but found it

difficult to do so. One-size fits all legislative mandates such as *A Plus* may signal the demise of middle schools as we know them by shortening or eliminating exploratory classes, a key component of the middle school concept.

Concluding Thoughts

This study provided a careful examination of the perspectives of three rural middle school principals regarding the evaluation and supervision of teachers as they worked to implement Georgia's *A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000*. These perspectives are indicative of the manner in which the three rural principals implemented the evaluative and supervisory mandates of *A Plus*. The current era of accountability in education has created an environment of concern for how teachers teach and how students learn. The evaluation and supervision of teachers has become a high-stakes undertaking in which principals must strive to do more, unfortunately this often means with less, however. In the high stakes environment, principals must understand the supervision of teachers and how supervision intersects evaluation and professional development. The learning curve is high, but the goal is attainable.

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