

TITLE Race to the Top Reform and Leadership Practices that Drive Urban High School Transformation to Increase Graduation Rates

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OBJECTIVE The purpose of this holistic qualitative case study was to determine how the administrator of an urban high school in Georgia demonstrated Kouzes and Posner's (2012) five exemplary leadership practices in implementing reform efforts to decrease the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate under Race to the Top (RT3).

METHODOLOGY

The population for this study includes administrators and teachers in urban school districts located in Georgia. The chosen school district includes seven high schools, five of which had graduation rates below 60 percent in 2014. The LPI-Self was administered to the school principal and the responses were used in the focused interview questions about how the principal engaged in specific behaviors and actions associated with the leadership challenge model. Individual interviews with the leadership team (N=11) gathered their perceptions of the principal's behaviors and actions, which are associated with the leadership challenge model. In addition to the interviews, the use of documentation in the form of Georgia's RT3 application and the final summary evaluation, which included the research district, corroborate the perceptions of the district and the high school, the need for reform to increase the graduation rate, and the progress of the reform efforts.

KEY FINDINGS

The author concludes: "The results support the leadership challenge theory that extraordinary leaders make a profound positive difference in the commitment and performance of staff members" (p.110). In addition, she notes:

In this Georgia high school the transformational leader clearly demonstrated these attributes through constant professional learning, sharing her personal story, modeling instruction, and being accessible to the entire school community. The way in which these findings align with the transformational practices and characteristics of effective school leaders and the success the school has achieved to this point serves to further strengthen the validity of Kouzes and Posner's (2012) model of five exemplary leadership practices and indicates a clear path to creating school leaders who can effect change (pp. 116-117).

This transformational leader intentionally involved teachers and staff in decision-making, emphasized accountability for everyone, and constantly verbalized the vision and how shared values influenced teaching and learning and contributed to

each student's success. These observable actions align well with transformational leadership practices and, again, provide clear and achievable practices that are evidenced to contribute to the success of school reform efforts. Transformational leadership in this regard is no longer something to be discussed "in theory" but rather something to be expected and observed if school districts have any expectations that concentrated school reform efforts will work (p. 117).

Throughout the research site there was evidence of a culture challenging the process where the staff was encouraged to be innovative and implement new strategies. The transformational leader did not micromanage but instead provided resources, training, and professional development. Within this study, the staff clearly had a role to play and chose to engage in the cultural shift with their principal's transformational leadership practices. Change can happen with leadership. . . .). In this study's transformational culture staff members were appointed and empowered to lead collaborative planning and professional learning, decision making was shared, and the administrator coached individuals to strengthen their skill set (p. 118).

The researcher found that staff leaders perceived the behaviors of the school administrator and the processes and practices implemented in the school setting to be transformational in efforts to increase the graduation rate. Staff leaders confirmed results indicating that the administrator frequently engaged in four leadership challenge transformational practices – model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, and enable others to act. The perception of staff leaders also indicated Encouraging the heart as an opportunity for growth (p. 119).

Results of this study revealed that student achievement and graduation rates improved under the leadership of an administrator who engaged in Kouzes and Posner's leadership challenge model practices (p. 120).