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Ellen Eckman

Marquette University, [ellen.eckman@marquette.edu](mailto:ellen.eckman@marquette.edu)

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# The Coprincipalship: It's Not Lonely at the Top

Ellen Wexler Eckman

*School of Education, Educational Policy and Leadership,  
Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI*

The coprincipalship has been suggested as an organizational structure that addresses the increasing workload and time demands of the principal as well as the shortage of qualified applicants for the position. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study of coprincipals in public and private schools in California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maine, Oregon, and Wisconsin. The participants describe the rationale for the model, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it functions. The coprincipals expressed particular satisfaction at sharing workloads and decision making because they were not isolated as solo leaders. Though the coprincipalship model offers possibilities for making the role of principal attractive, additional information is needed to develop a sustainable model.

The role of the principal has expanded and become increasingly complex over the last 25 years (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Goodwin, Cunningham, & Eagle, 2005; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). For many principals, meeting this workload intensification has led to increased conflicts between their personal and professional lives, along with decreased levels of job satisfaction (Eckman, 2004; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). The work demands and role

conflicts have led many principals to leave their positions, thereby resulting in a high turnover in the principalship (Pounder & Merrill, 2001) and a growing shortage of qualified and experienced candidates for principal positions in nearly all districts in the United States (Houston, 1998; Protheroe, 2001; Young & McLeod, 2001).

Researchers have called for restructuring or reconceptualizing the principalship to address the increased complexity, onerous time demands, and lack of qualified applicants for the position (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2002; Eckman, 2006; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Naso, 2005; Pierce & Fenwick, 2002). Pounder and Merrill (2001) argue, "No one person should be expected to provide direct oversight for all school dimensions and activities" (p. 19). They suggest that a way to minimize the unattractive aspects of the principal's position is to unbundle and repackage the job responsibilities with an administrative team that shares the leadership of the school.

One way to restructure the role of the principal into an administrative team with shared leadership is through the implementation of a coprincipalship. Although the coprincipal leadership model has been used in schools in the United States and abroad for over 30 years, there is a paucity of information about how the model is operationalized (Court, 2003; Eckman, 2006; Gronn & Hamilton, 2004; Korba, 1982; Shockley & Smith, 1981; West, 1978). What is needed are answers to questions regarding why some school districts have implemented a coprincipalship, how the role of the principal is divided, and how leadership is coordinated and shared between two people. To answer these questions, coprincipals in this study were interviewed about the type of coprincipal model used, the factors that led to the implementation of the model, the working relationships among the coprincipals, the strengths and weaknesses of the model, and the potential for the model to make the principalship a more attractive position.

## **Related Literature**

A proposal to restructure the principalship by dividing the role of the principal into two positions was first mentioned by West in 1978.

West portrayed principals as a "beleaguered, bewildered and beat species" (p. 241) because of the increasingly high expectations and demands that they were facing. He described school boards and superintendents who expected principals to increase academic gains while minimizing dropouts and suspensions, control expenditures, protect the system from legal issues, and write and submit numerous reports. He found teachers increasing their demands for a supportive environment with ample materials and resources, parents who expected personal attention from the principal, and academics calling for instructional leadership. For West, the solution to these increased demands was to reorganize the administrative structure, creating a coprincipalship, with one administrator serving as the principal of instruction and the other as the principal of administration.

As superintendent of High Point Public Schools, High Point, North Carolina, West (1978) implemented the coprincipal model in three middle schools and two high schools in his district during the 1976-1977 school year. After 1 year of operation, West concluded that the coprincipalship was a viable alternative for improving the principalship because there had been increases in supervision of teachers, participation in professional development opportunities, efficiency of the custodial staff, and job satisfaction for the two administrators. The coprincipal model continued in High Point until 1987, when it was phased out because the district merged with three neighboring school systems (Groover, 1989).

West (1978) was not alone in proposing and implementing a coprincipal leadership model in the late 1970s. Shockley and Smith (1981) outline reasons for selecting a coprincipal model similar to West's for the Putnam County Schools, West Virginia, in 1979. For them, the coprincipalship was "an attempt to provide improved management techniques to run increasingly complex schools where all too often instructional leadership has taken second place to expanding administrative duties" (p. 92). Korba (1982) argues that demand.., for accountability in the secondary schools necessitated an organizational structure with two principals-one for resource allocation (administration) and one for goal attainment (instruction). He also notes that such a change would present challenges to school district in terms of budgets, contracts, and certification of leaders.

Despite the continued implementation of the coprincipalship, only limited information has been published on this leadership model (Court, 2003; Eckman, 2006). Much of the published information is found in the popular or practitioner press as personal accounts by coprincipals (Brown & Feltham, 1997; Cromwell, 2002; Flemming, 2003; Harrell, 1999; Helfand, 2003). There have also been several articles that describe the factors considered by school districts when implementing a coprincipalship (Chirichello, 2003, 2004; Muffs & Schmitz, 1999; Naso, 2005).

Between 1989 and 2002, four dissertations from U.S. institutions described coprincipal leadership models. Groover (1989) presents a case study of the implementation of the coprincipalship model in a school district in North Carolina. Dass (1995) describes the 1st year of operation of a coprincipal team in a public high school in Oregon. Gilbreath's (2001) study of the coprincipalship model at 19 schools in California describes the reasons for implementing the coprincipal model, as well as some explanation of how the model operated in those schools. Jameson (2002) conducted a case study that focused on the strengths and weakness of a coprincipal model in a comprehensive high school in California.

Researchers in other countries have also studied the coprincipal leadership model. In a longitudinal study of coprincipals in New Zealand, Court (2003, 2004) notes that the impetus for developing coprincipal teams was not only to create more inclusive decision making and collaboration but also to reduce the isolation experienced by solo principals. Gronn (1999) presents a historical account of an Australian boarding school that operated under what he suggested was a dual-leadership, or coprincipal, model. Gronn and Hamilton (2004) describe the coprincipalship as an example of distributed leadership in their study of a coprincipal team in a Catholic secondary school in Australia. They comment,

No matter how deeply culturally ingrained the process of solo attribution-making may be, along with the possessive individualism of "my school" that frequently accompanies it, this attribution is learned and that, like any other cultural practice, it can also be unlearned. (p. 32)

Gronn and Hamilton further call for research on the "unique" role of the coprincipal that would increase the understanding of the dynamics of the working relationships between the pair of leaders and how the model might lead to less work intensification in the role of the principal.

Paterson (2006), in summarizing the development of the coheadship, reported that over 30 schools in the United Kingdom had established coleaders or coheadships since 1995. He concludes that the coheadship phenomenon had emerged during this period because "the requirements of leadership are so complex that two people are better able to offer the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise to fulfill the demands of the job" (p. 5). Paterson indicates that if the coheadship model was going to be a "creative response to the looming head-teacher shortages" (p. 8) in the United Kingdom, then research was needed to determine how to make it a sustainable and viable option.

Grubb and Flessa (2006) present additional information on the coprincipal model in their examination of 10 schools in California where nontraditional or alternative leadership styles had been implemented. They examined several schools where the coprincipal model had been implemented, discussed the reasons for its implementation, and described the amount and type of district support needed to maintain the model. Grubb and Flessa indicate some of the benefits of the coprincipal model—for instance, more attention to instructional practices and support services; more availability of principals to parents, students, and teachers; and a reduction in the arduous demands and responsibilities placed on traditional solo principals. The authors decide, "If these alternatives could reduce the turnover in principals, or make the principalship more attractive to teachers, this alone might be worth the costs of the reform" (p. 543). Grubb and Flessa challenge researchers to continue studying alternative leadership practices such as the coprincipalship because of the potential that these models offer for restructuring the role of the principal as well as for increasing leadership development and succession in schools.

This article aims to extend knowledge and understanding of the coprincipal leadership model by examining the model from the perspective of practicing coprincipals from schools in the United States. This article examines the coprincipal leadership model with regard to the implementation and operation of the model, the benefits and problems associated with the model, and the potential of the model to address the workload intensification in the principalship and to make the principal position more appealing to future candidates.

## **Method and Procedure**

My investigation of the coprincipal leadership model was conducted in two phases from 2003 to 2006. The first phase involved identifying and surveying coprincipals; the second involved in-depth interviews with a sample of the coprincipals who had responded to the survey. This article presents the findings from the second, or qualitative, phase of the study.

## **Selection of Participants**

Using information from the National Association of Secondary School Principals,<sup>1</sup> Internet searches, and snowball sampling techniques, I located 170 individuals who were serving as coprincipals in private and public schools throughout the United States. Survey packets were mailed to all of those identified as coprincipals, containing demographic questions regarding age; marital status; gender; years of experience; career paths; tenure as a coprincipal; and size, type, and location of school. Questions were asked about the coprincipal leadership model, such as the reasons for implementing the model, the type of model implemented, and the strengths and weakness associated with the model. The survey packet included previously tested instruments that have been shown to be both reliable and valid, measuring role conflict (Nevill & Damico, 1974), role commitment (Napholz, 1995), and job satisfaction (Mendenhall, 1977; Schneider, 1984). The return rate for the survey packet was 51%.

The participants for the qualitative phase of the study were purposefully selected from the group of coprincipals who responded to the initial survey. The sample of coprincipals who participated in the

qualitative phase were selected to represent the coprincipals who responded to the survey in the quantitative phase. There was no significant difference in role conflict scores, role commitment, or level of job satisfaction,  $t = .91$ ,  $df = 76$ ,  $p = .37$ ; chi-square = 2.30,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .13$ ; and  $t = 1.01$ ,  $df = 68$ ,  $p = .32$ , respectively. The selection process was designed to include a representative sample from schools in different states as well as in urban, suburban, small-city, and rural schools.

## **Collection of Data**

Fifteen coprincipals agreed to participate in semistructured interview sessions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The interview questions were designed to allow the participants to describe the reasons for their coleadership models, their career paths to the coprincipal ship, their methods for sharing leadership responsibilities, the strengths and weaknesses of the model, how they balanced their personal and professional lives, the factors that contributed to their job satisfaction, and their perceptions regarding the potential for the model to attract candidates to the principalship.

Following the qualitative research techniques outlined by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), the interview sessions lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were held at times and in settings that were convenient for the participants. Each participant was involved in one interview session, and coprincipals on the same team were each interviewed individually. All of the interview sessions were tape-recorded and then professionally transcribed. Ten of the interviews were conducted in person; the others were done as telephone interviews.

## *Analysis of Data*

The interviews were coded and assigned categories. Themes emerged through this coding process that were related to the broad categories presented by the interview questions (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). To facilitate analysis, the transcribed interviews were entered into the N\*Vivo software package (Weitzman, 2000). Each transcript was read for the second and third time as the data were entered into the software program. Statements were selected from the interviews

that illustrated the themes and were then indexed under the appropriate nodes in the software program. A second reader confirmed the selection of the coding and themes. A draft copy of the themes was sent to the participants for comment and feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Generalizations from the findings may be limited by a self-selection bias; the participants in the interviews were selected from those coprincipals who returned the survey packet. Coprincipals who were instrumental in establishing the coprincipal model or were satisfied with the model might have been more inclined to respond than others. During the interview sessions, questions were asked about problems associated with the coprincipalship, in an attempt to present a balanced view of the model.

The themes identified in the analysis provide the major sections of this article: characteristics of the coprincipals; coprincipal leadership models; rationales for implementing the model; defining the role of the coprincipal; the working relationships of coprincipals; benefits of the model; problems encountered by the coprincipals; and a conclusion summarizing and discussing the potential of the model to address leadership issues and attract qualified aspirants to the principalship.

### *Characteristics of the Participants*

The 8 females and 7 males who participated in this study were leaders of public, parochial, and charter schools located in urban, suburban, and rural areas of California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maine, Oregon, and Wisconsin. They were leaders of elementary schools (3 females and 4 males), middle schools (1 female), and high schools (2 females and 3 males) and a public charter school with Grades 3-12 (2 females). Their schools had student populations that ranged from 70 to 4,500 students. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 63 years (*Mdn* = 55 years). All but one of the participants was married; 5 had children living at home. Of the 15 participants, 5 coprincipals participated in the study without the other members of their teams. The remaining participants were from five teams: 3 from elementary schools, 1 at a high school, and 1 from a charter school.

The participants had been coprincipals from 1 to 6 years (*Mdn* = 3 years). Nine had been traditional principals before becoming coprincipals; their years of principal experience ranged from 3 to 32 (*Mdn* = 5.5 years). Three had been assistant principals immediately before becoming coprincipals, and 3 had become coprincipals directly from teaching positions. All the participants had been teachers; the median number of years of teaching experience was 11.

Nine participants indicated some interest in becoming a traditional solo principal; 4 participants indicated that they had aspirations for a superintendent position. One participant had completed 5 years as a coprincipal and was retiring at the end of the study year; he gave no indication of postretirement plans. Four participants had retired from positions as traditional principals and returned to the principalship only because they could serve in the role as a coprincipal. They expressed no aspirations for the superintendency or a return to a traditional solo principal position. Two of the retirees were serving as coprincipals of a parochial elementary school. The other 2 retirees were serving as a team at a large urban high school and had committed to that position for only 1 year.

## **Coprincipal Leadership Models**

### *Full-Time Coprincipals*

In a full-time coprincipal model, two principals serve simultaneously, sharing the position and work with equal authority and responsibility. Ten of the coprincipals in this study were working in this type of full-time model. For six of the full-time coprincipals, their salaries were set at the same level as those of traditional solo principals in their school districts. For the other four full-time coprincipals, their salaries were established as the midpoint between the salary for a traditional principal and the salary for an assistant principal. One participant acknowledged that although his willingness to accept a lower pay scale might have caused some problems for other administrators in the district, he felt justified because "we're not really principals. We're coprincipals."

## *Part-Time Coprincipals*

In a part-time coprincipal model, two principals share the position of principal on a half-time basis, dividing up the days of the week in which they are present and responsible for the school. There were two part-time coprincipal teams—one at a K-8 parochial school and the other at a public high school. The coprincipal team at the parochial school consisted of two previously retired principals who shared the role of principal, with only one coprincipal in charge of the school on any given day. They each received half the salary that a traditional principal would receive. The coprincipal team at the public high school also consisted of two previously retired principals. Because they were already receiving their state retirement benefits, they could only work 120 of the 180 student school days. At the beginning of the academic year, they decided which days they both would be present at the school, and then they divided up the remaining school days. As retirees, they considered their salary a "financial windfall" and were quite comfortable sharing the salary of an experienced full-time principal.

## **Alternative Model**

One participant reported an additional type of coprincipal model. In this case, the participant was a full-time coprincipal with a coprincipal partner who only worked part-time. The part-time coprincipal was hired because she was a licensed and experienced principal; however, she did not wish to work full-time. The school board selected as the full-time coprincipal a veteran teacher at the school who would be able to combine her knowledge of the students, families, and school traditions with the experienced leadership of the part-time coprincipal. The full-time coprincipal credited her partner with mentoring her and teaching her about the principalship. This alternative model was implemented for 3 years.

## **Rationales for Implementing the Coprincipal Model**

The participants provided a variety of explanations for the establishment of the coprincipal model at their schools. Surprisingly, several of them mentioned that little or no research had been done before initiating the model. Superintendents, principals, and teachers simply proposed the model because it seemed to be a logical and natural solution to a leadership problem facing their schools.

Several participants reported that increasingly large student populations had made the role of the principal too much for one person. A participant at an elementary school with 1,250 students explained, "This job is not possible. I can't be an instructional leader for a staff this large. There are too many adults that need to hear from the principal." He persuaded the superintendent to try a leadership model with two coprincipals and an assistant principal; the model had been in place for 6 years at the time of this study. A participant from a high school with over 4,500 students reported that her entire school district implemented the coprincipalship model in each of its comprehensive high schools to address the increasing workload and complex problems associated with leading large schools.

The coprincipal model was implemented in several schools as a solution to leadership crises, such as the unexpected departure of the principal, a lack of qualified and experienced candidates, and a failed search for a principal. In three school districts, the assistant principals themselves proposed a coprincipalship because their schools had experienced numerous turnovers in the principal position. They suggested to their superintendents that, rather than choose between the two assistant principals, the district should establish a coprincipal model and hire both of them.

For some schools, the coprincipal model proved to be a way to attract experienced leaders to the principalship. One team of retired principals explained that they wanted to continue serving as school leaders but only if they could share the workload and the hours: "We thought of a situation where we could become the principal of a school together and have the ability to set our own schedules." A parochial

school in their area was advertising for a principal in the middle of the summer; they applied together and were hired as a team. In another case, a superintendent recruited a retired principal to return to the high school principalship because the newly appointed principal had resigned rather unexpectedly in the middle of the summer. This participant agreed to take the position but only if he could have a coprincipal. He explained,

I didn't want to work 80-hour weeks anymore. That's what I think a principal has to be ready to do. So the concept of a coprincipal was appealing to me, because you can divide up the tasks and responsibilities and not get beat up.

A unique beginning for one coprincipalship occurred in an elementary school, with a traditional principal-assistant-principal model. Assistant principals in that district typically remained in a school for 1 year and were then moved into their own principalships at different schools in the district. This principal did not want to be constantly training a new assistant principal and thus decided to investigate alternative leadership models. Though she found no information on dual-leadership models at the elementary school level, she learned about a coprincipal team in a high school in her state. She proposed the model to her superintendent and was given the opportunity to implement a coprincipalship. However, to sell the proposal to the school board, she had to agree to a pay cut; her salary was set at the midpoint between the salary of the principal and the assistant principal. The principal commented, "I'd rather take a cut in pay and keep my health and my help." This coprincipalship team continued successfully for 3 years, ending at the start of this study, when one member of the team left to become the solo principal of a new school in the district.

Another reason for implementing the coprincipal model was provided by the two participants who were cofounders of a public charter school. For them, the coprincipal leadership model was a natural consequence of creating a new school. One clarified, "If one of us was a principal and the other an assistant principal, then people get a traditional model. But we weren't doing a traditional model for the school."

## **Defining the Role of the Coprincipal**

When West (1978) proposed a coprincipal leadership model, he envisioned a structure where the role responsibilities of the principal would be divided between a principal of administration and a principal of instruction. The principal of administration would be responsible for budgets, payrolls, facilities, food services, transportation, and data collection. The principal of instruction would serve as the instructional leader and would be responsible for areas such as curriculum design, student scheduling, student discipline and supervision, staff development, and staff evaluation and supervision.

A majority of the participants indicated that such a clearly defined division of the role and work of the principal was not followed in their coprincipal models. They described a division of responsibilities based entirely on their individual preferences, skills, and interests: "We take on one of the agendas in the building that really is best suited to us." The participants indicated that they wanted to experience all of the roles of the principal: "If we had structured it differently where one of us had done the instruction and one had done the management, one of us might have been freed up, but who wants to do that? Who wants to be pigeonholed?" Most participants described themselves as being "teachers of teachers," and they were quite reluctant to give up the instructional leadership functions of the principalship.

For most participants, being a coprincipal meant they had the time and energy to be engaged as instructional leaders. They divided the academic departments in their schools based on their individual strengths and interests, which allowed them to specialize and work with a specific set of teachers on instructional issues: "The teachers have one of us to report to. That's been really good. That way we can know the history of the problems and the issues." One participant reported that for the first time in 7 years the department chairs and other administrators were being supervised; with coprincipals, there was finally the time and the personnel to conduct that type of supervision. Interestingly, the part-time coprincipals at the parochial school decided to both do all of the teacher observations and

evaluations because they thought it was valuable for a teacher to have two perspectives of his or her work.

An important and enormously time-consuming role of the principal that all the participants were more than willing to share involved the supervision and attendance at extracurricular activities, evening meetings and events, and districtwide meetings. One high school coprincipal noted with pleasure, "It cut the number of meetings in half. ... It isn't overwhelming." An elementary school coprincipal reported, "So all of these night meetings, we don't feel that we both have to be there together. One of us stays late for parents night in the fall and one of stays late in the spring."

For nine coprincipals, sharing the role of principal also meant sharing office space. The part-time coprincipal teams used the same desk, phone, computer, calendar, and secretary. Three full-time coprincipals described creating space within a single office to accommodate both of them: "I was on this half, and she was over there. Two computers, two of everything. And it worked." Another team reported that although they had separate desks and computers in their shared office, they had only one telephone. The remaining six full-time coprincipals had their own offices and their own secretaries.

## **Working Relationships of Coprincipals**

Jackson (1977) offered the following description of a significant and defining characteristic of the traditional principal, that of being lonely at the top:

The stereotype pictures the chief administrator as the maker of big decisions, a responsibility that is his alone. His desk is where the buck stops, as the expression goes, and there is no way of ducking that harsh fact. He can certainly call on advisors to aid him and usually does .... But after all the advice is in and the advisors repair to their own corners of the institution, there remains the final act of declaring, "We will do this, rather than that." A lonely business. (p. 428)

All the participants acknowledged that their ability to share leadership, to not be alone at the top, was the most valuable

component of the coprincipal leadership model. Those who had been traditional principals explained that though having an assistant principal had been helpful, it did not compare to working with a coprincipal. Only a coprincipal or a coleader could share the authority, the power, and the decision making in a way that truly addressed the isolation experienced by a solo leader.

Sharing leadership was, however, dependent on the ability of the participants to develop strong personal relationships with their partners-relationships characterized by trust and respect: "I think that the individuals need to know each other, respect each other.... The most important piece is the relationship between the two. And if there is not complete trust, it's not going to work." Some participants reported that because they worked together so closely, they knew how their partner might think on certain issues and could even anticipated their answers to questions. One coprincipal described feeling as if he had lost his left arm when his coprincipal of 4 years retired: "I'm having to try to think now about things that she always just naturally thought about."

The participants identified the following factors as being essential to establishing the working relationships needed to make the coprincipalship a viable model: sharing decision making, communicating effectively, dealing with the dynamics of two leaders, and accepting differences in leadership styles.

### *Sharing Decision Making*

Because principals are constantly making decisions, sometimes split-second decisions, they frequently question whether or not they made the right decisions (Jackson, 1977). For the participants, one of the values of the coprincipalship involved having a partner to share in those decisions: "If you're making very difficult decisions, there's a lot of comfort in knowing that you have someone else to say, 'Look I'm on the right track here.' Especially when you're making a decision about staffing and letting someone go."

Working with a partner forced most participants to examine issues from different perspectives and, for some teams, with different

gendered lenses. They recognized that their partners processed the same events in different ways, and they believed that this led to thoughtful discussions as they worked out problems and arrived at consensus. One participant found the yin and yang of balancing to be the most critical and most alluring part of the coprincipalship. Others explained that the shared decision-making process, though longer and somewhat time consuming, ultimately gave them more confidence in their final decisions and meant fewer poor decisions.

To effectively share in decision making, the participants acknowledged that they had to become a little bit selfless and more comfortable with compromising. Several participants described learning to check their egos. They became skilled at thinking not only about their needs but also about the needs and ideas of their partners. They continuously strived to reach agreement and consensus. As a group, the participants agreed with this summation of the process: "If this is what you really think needs to happen, we'll do it and I'll support you and if you can't as two people come to that place, you're doomed to failure."

### *Communicating Effectively*

All the participants mentioned that for their coprincipal relationship to succeed, it was essential to constantly communicate with the partners. They used notes, e-mail, phone calls, and numerous informal and formal talks. They shared their daily and weekly calendars and scheduled regular meeting times. One explained,

We're outside every morning and every afternoon for student arrival and dismissal and so you have that chitchat. But on Tuesday morning we meet and we have at least an hour and we're planning, informing, and letting each other know what's going on and countless times during the day we're also catching up with each other and strategizing.

The participants engaged in constant discussion and debate with their partners over issues and problems, such as student discipline, teacher grievances, parental requests, and budget demands. One remarked that he talked with his partner so often that "if you asked me what number he was thinking of, I would be able to tell you. We

truly know each other. We've talked about all of these issues over and over again." The process of communicating frequently required the coprincipals to go behind closed doors and keep talking until they arrived at an agreement, or what most of them referred to as "a united front." Only one participant characterized this level of communication as being inefficient. She thought that compromising to arrive at consensus meant that "we ended up both kind of not totally being ourselves."

### *Dynamics of Dual-Leadership Teams*

Several participants described the work of a coprincipal team in terms of a "mom and pop" arrangement. The teachers, parents, and students tested the teams as if they were "Mom and Dad-playing one against the other." To make certain that they were not being played off each other, the coprincipals constantly referred to each other, handled disagreements behind closed doors, and presented a united front on their decisions. They noted that it did not take long for parents, teachers, and students to understand that the coprincipals worked together and shared information and decisions. Several participants acknowledged that, just as in some families, one partner might be seen as the "heavy and the other the nice guy." They described working to create relationships that would not perpetuate that dynamic.

Participants used other marital terms to characterize the coprincipal model. They portrayed their close relationships with their partners as being similar to couples in a marriage because of the levels of commitment, communication, and trust needed to establish and maintain their working relationships. Some characterized coprincipal teams as "arranged marriages" and noted that some teams ended in divorce. One participant even suggested that the coprincipalship "probably works out as often as when you pick your spouse; it would really be a special couple that was singing the same song all day long for a period of time."

## **Appreciating Differences in Leadership Styles**

Several participants explained that for their coprincipal team to work effectively, they had learned to accept each other's leadership style. Some indicated that it was the differences in styles that actually made them a great team. One participant described herself as being more assertive than her partner. Another noted, "I am the talker and schmoozer, while she's the writer. We complement each other." Most participants agreed that one of the more important elements of their coprincipalship was that they shared similar philosophies and core beliefs. One commented, "I think when it comes down to the real nuts and bolts of issues, we don't really even have to talk about them. We're both pretty much on the same page." Another explained, "We both want the school to succeed. We both have the same interests in mind. It's just how we go about doing it which is sometimes different."

## **Benefits of a Coprincipalship**

The participants identified several benefits of the coprincipal leadership model: personal job satisfaction, access and availability of coprincipals, importance of modeling shared leadership, and the potential of the model to attract aspirants to the principalship.

### *Personal Job Satisfaction*

All the participants mentioned being satisfied with their work as coprincipals, chiefly because they were not lonely at the top: "There is somebody else that I'm doing this with." One explained, "I think the most satisfaction for me is to have that camaraderie and collegiality with another adult ... and to share the leadership. It's really invigorating." They mentioned their personal satisfaction in finally having both the time and energy to introduce and complete educational improvements and reforms in their schools. One exclaimed, "I'd probably do this for nothing. I'm enjoying it so much."

The participants all expressed satisfaction with the flexible times and shared workload that resulted from being a coprincipal. They uniformly articulated their satisfaction at knowing that the other coprincipal was available to cover the school if they could not be

present. Several recognized that having a coprincipal allowed them to attend professional meetings as well as balance their personal lives. When a child was sick or a parent needed assistance, they knew that they could call their coprincipals for support and not worry about their responsibilities as principal. A participant who had been a traditional solo principal reported that the coprincipalship was more satisfying because he was finally able to balance his workload with his family needs. Unfortunately, his coprincipal retired, and he found himself once again a solo principal struggling to balance an 80-hour workweek with his role as a parent.

### *Access and Availability of Coprincipals*

According to the participants, a major benefit of the model for teachers, parents, and community members is that when there are coprincipals, there is always someone to go to—someone with the authority to respond to questions and make decisions. The participants acknowledged that they were rarely out of the building at the same time as their coprincipals were, so one coprincipal was always available.

Parents and teachers who want to "go to the top" found that having two principals made access easier. One participant noted,

Parents enjoy this model because it gives them a chance to make a personal connection to the principal because there's more than one of us. It's seen here that a very large school is made into a small school, which the parents seem to greatly enjoy.

Several participants commented on the value of having two principals available for those situations when parents "don't have a positive relationship with one of the principals." In one case, having coprincipals had allowed for more outreach and accessibility to the community at large, which resulted in an increase in the school's enrollment.

## *Importance of Modeling Shared Leadership*

Over half the participants reported that a beneficial outcome of the coprincipal model involved an increase in shared teaching and leading from their faculty members. One participant reported that since the model had been implemented at her school, teachers had begun to serve as coleaders on faculty committees. Another participant commented that his teachers had requested implementing more team teaching in their classrooms, which he believed was a result of observing the coprincipal model: "I was convinced that what they really were talking about.... I had a partner, they wanted the same thing." Another explained that the coprincipalship "has really fostered communication between teachers about their practice ... reflecting out loud to their peers. They see the two principals doing that with one another on a daily basis."

## *Attracting Aspirants to the Principalship*

Several participants discussed the potential of the coprincipal model to attract qualified candidates to the principalship. They noted that by appealing to retired principals "who love being a principal, but also want the flexibility of having time off," the coprincipal model provided a pool of experienced and qualified leaders who were ready and willing to lead schools. Interestingly, the team of retired principals hired to lead a large urban school that was without a principal indicated that what most appealed to them was the opportunity to work with one another in a setting where their skills and experiences were critically needed.

Women formed another pool of potential candidates that was mentioned by the participants for the principalship. Five participants noted that because the coprincipal leadership model provided more principal positions overall, there were more opportunities in their districts for women to become principals. In this study, three participants were members of male-female teams; four participants were on female-female teams; and six participants were members of male-male teams.

Several participants noted that the coprincipal model had opened up more high school principalships for women. A high school coprincipal explained that for him, one of the more appealing parts of the coprincipalship was having a male-female team: "I think women and men process things differently. It is important that you have both forms of processing in terms of faculty and kids coming in and talking to you about problems and challenges." Another reported that there were several male-female coprincipal teams at the high schools in her district and that the district was committed to gender balanced coprincipal teams.

Teachers are often not drawn to the position of principal because they observe the workload intensification of their own principals and are reluctant to make the transition to administration (Gronn & RawlingsSanaei, 2003). A participant who went directly from teaching to the role of coprincipal explained that she did so only because she knew that her coprincipal partner would provide on-the-job training. She commented, "Whatever I learned I feel like I've really learned through her and watching her." After the coprincipal model was implemented at his school, a participant noted,

There were many teachers who now wanted to be part of the coprincipal model because they saw the role as almost a junior principal, more than an assistant, but not quite the principal. They were able to learn from a mentor how to be a principal.

Another participant suggested that the leadership capacity of a school could be developed by staggering coprincipals so that an experienced coprincipal was always mentoring and training a newer coprincipal.

## **Problems Encountered by Coprincipals**

The participants described several problems that they thought were inherent to the coprincipal leadership model: leadership ambiguity, inefficiencies and redundancies, wavering school district support, creating and maintaining a team, and balancing personal and professional roles.

## *Leadership Ambiguity*

Several participants mentioned that with two leaders, there could be some ambiguity with regard to who was in charge. One participant commented that the very definition of principal means "they're the top." With coprincipals, there was always the question of "where does the buck stop?" One participant observed that even after 6 years with a coprincipal model, parents, teachers, and community members still expressed doubts: "They couldn't understand how two people can make a decision. They could not figure out how that worked."

Other administrators and teachers often misunderstood the coprincipal leadership model. One participant noted that despite being a full-time coprincipal for 3 years, principals and central-office administrators in her district thought that she was merely sharing the role of principal and working only a few days of the week. Another was disappointed when she announced that the coprincipalship was ending and that she was taking a principal position because her teachers declared, "Now you get to be a real principal."

A majority of the participants were concerned about the lack of clearly stated procedures for evaluating their leadership roles as coprincipals. Four participants thought that they would be evaluated as individual principals; one thought that there would be a team evaluation process; and three were unsure how or when evaluations would occur. According to one participant, it is difficult to evaluate coprincipals because central-office supervisors "don't know where her skills end and mine begin. They couldn't tell what I was doing and what she was doing."

## *Inefficiencies and Redundancies*

A few participants believed that the need for constant communication between the coprincipals, the time-consuming work needed to arrive at consensus, and the necessity of presenting a united front created an inefficient leadership model. A participant expressed frustration over the amount of time spent "getting [her coprincipal] up to speed with the phone calls I picked up this morning

that are in his area, and his 10 minutes back with me." She thought that issues would be handled more efficiently and in less time if she were the solo principal and did not have to communicate and compromise with her partner.

Several participants recognized that the lack of job definitions for each coprincipal made the model inefficient: "It didn't work because we didn't have the differentiation of roles. We kept overlapping." A source of inefficiency in the part-time model involved a lack of continuity because the coprincipals worked on different days: "Staff might come to her on a Monday, but she wasn't there on Tuesday to give them the answer. However, people want an immediate answer, so that was a problem."

### *Wavering School District Support*

Several participants identified the financial costs of the coprincipal model as a concern in their districts. According to one participant, teachers questioned why there was the need for two principals, especially in a time of tight budgets and financial constraints. Another was frustrated by the constant effort needed to convince the school board to continue with the model. When she and her partner attended school board meetings together so that neither one would be out of the loop, school board members criticized them for doubling up their work. For other participants, it was community members who made comparisons and questioned whether two principals were needed: "Here's another community nearby, same configuration, same number of students. They're only spending this much on administration and you're spending that much."

Despite evidence that the coprincipal model had been successful and cost effective for their district, one team of coprincipals acknowledged that the continuation of the model depended on the superintendent's support: "When superintendents change, someone else comes in and there's always a need to identify their territory and make their mark. So there is no way to know what is going to happen to our model with the new superintendent." Another explained that her superintendent agreed to support the coprincipal model for only 1 year. Interestingly, she noted that "when he spoke with staff, parents,

and students, he found out that people really liked it," and he agreed to continue the model.

## *Creating and Maintaining a Team*

A problem facing superintendents and school boards in implementing the coprincipal model involves finding the right two people to make it work. A participant explained,

I don't think that you can say, "Okay, I want Jim and Susan and you two are going to be coprincipals," and you plunk them in and it's going to work. I think that the individuals need to know each other, respect each other. They have to be able to work together.

Another claimed, "The only way that it would work is if you and a partner went in together .... Then you would be in your office with a friend, someone you actually want to spend time with."

It is problematic for superintendents and school boards when one member of a coprincipal team leaves. One school board was quite explicit about how it would handle succession in the coprincipalship. It only agreed to the coprincipal model with the stipulation that if either coprincipal left, the other one would continue as a traditional solo principal. In another case, a coprincipal was retiring at the end of the year of this study. The superintendent and school board in that district were committed to continuing the model and were involved in developing a way to identify qualified applicants who could work well with the existing coprincipal. However, the remaining coprincipal was concerned about their ability to find a match.

Other participants expressed similar concerns about finding someone who could step in to be coprincipal. A participant who was losing his coprincipal to retirement recognized that he was looking for a candidate with the same qualities as the person who was leaving. He wondered if there was "some kind of screening instrument to kind of get to the heart of the other person." To find a match, another participant discussed the need to know the personality of a coprincipal, even to the degree of understanding his or her attitudes toward a neat or clean office. Finally, a coprincipal acknowledged, "To try to bring

somebody else up to speed now, after being together for 6 years, would be a lot of work."

However, the team of retired principals who were part-time coprinicpals at the parochial school had a different perspective on this issue. They explained that if either one of them left the coprinicpalship, they would immediately look for another experienced individual as a partner. They both wanted to continue to serve as principals, but neither one of them wanted to return to the role of a full-time traditional principal.

### *Balancing Personal and Professional Roles*

Not unlike traditional principals, the coprinicpals expressed conflicts over balancing their personal and professional lives (Eckman, 2004). Some of these conflicts were related to the pressures of child care; others were due to the needs of aging family members. According to several participants who had been traditional principals, the time demands of the fulltime coprinicpalship can be just as onerous as those in a traditional solo prinicpalship. Even with a coprinicpal, the daily work of leading a school was filled with an overwhelming number of tasks and activities. Like their solo counterparts, some of the coprinicpals found themselves working 10 to 11 hours a day. One commented,

Your day isn't your own ... which means that this work needs to be done. I take it home and often times I'm working until maybe 10 o'clock at night. Then I'll get up in the morning. Usually by 5:00 and read my e-mail. It is an incredibly long day.

However, most participants recognized that their work would have been even more demanding and time consuming without their partners.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Although the traditional model of a solo prinicpal is ingrained in the organizational structure of schools (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004), the coprinicpal models in this study were seen as natural or logical

solutions to a leadership crisis. The participants acknowledged that they were doing the principalship in a unique manner but were surprisingly unaware of any other schools using the model. The reasons mentioned for implementing a coprincipal model were as follows: lack of qualified candidates, large student populations, increased time demands and complexity in the role of principal, high turnover in the principalship, and recognition that the role was "too big for one person."

With the workload intensification in the principalship (Goodwin et al., 2005; Pierce & Fenwick, 2002), one might have expected the coprincipals to divide the role of principal into two functions: managerial and instructional leadership. However, this was not the case for the coprincipals in this study. All the participants defined their roles as coprincipals in terms of their strengths and interests, with both coprincipals serving as instructional leaders. The emphasis that they placed on being teachers of teachers is indicative of the importance of the instructional leadership function in the definition of the role of the principal. However, having each partner doing all the work of the principal requires the coprincipals to do more communication and more sharing than what might be necessary if there was a clearer division between the managerial and instructional leadership functions of the principal.

Coprincipals value not being alone at the top. They relish the opportunity to share the workload and the decision making of the principalship, even though it means sharing power and authority. The coprincipals thought that with a partner, they had been far more successful in leading their schools; meeting the needs of their students, teachers, parents, and community members; and moving their schools ahead with educational reforms. Perhaps the coprincipals were practicing what Gronn (2002) defines as concertive leadership action, which occurs when two leaders who are working together draw on their combined skills and knowledge and provide a product that is greater than the sum of their individual work.

However, as the participants made clear, for coprincipals to be effective leaders, the partners have to develop strong relationships that foster the utmost trust. To share power and authority requires

coprincipals to communicate constantly, keep their egos in check, and strive to create a united front. Just as in a marriage, there has to be some kind of match between the partners. This, of course, creates a problem because the "marriage" may end and school boards and superintendents may struggle to sustain the coprincipal model beyond the first team.

It is hard to evaluate the viability of the coprincipal model if its sustainability is based on the personalities of the coprincipals. What is needed is research on the factors that will improve the odds of creating a successful team. In particular, research is needed on how to create teams whose members have complementary skills and personalities, as well as how to develop mechanisms for coordinating the coleadership roles.

One question raised in this study is whether the coprincipal model can make the role of the principal more attractive for aspiring administrators and thus address a growing shortage of qualified candidates for the principalship. The participants indicated that they were satisfied with their work as coprincipals, particularly because they had a partner to work with. Sharing the workload meant there were fewer conflicts between personal and professional roles because the other coprincipal was available to handle school issues and events. Participants reported that they received considerable interest from applicants when they advertised for a coprincipal. A coprincipal for over 5 years offered this statement with regard to the potential of the coprincipal model to make the role of principal more appealing:

I've worked in both models. This is absolutely the best in my experience. I've been doing this work for 35 years, as a teacher and as an administrator. It's just so powerful to have people to collaborate with and communicate with and strategize with .... The power is tremendous. I think that the people who are doing the coprincipalship love it.

As for the question of addressing the shortage of qualified candidates for the principalship, the participants identified two groups of potential candidates. The first group consisted of retired principals. This group is certainly experienced and qualified and as such would address an interim need for leadership. However, retired principals do

not offer a long-term solution to the shortage of candidates for the principalship.

The participants also identified women as a source of potential candidates for the coprincipalship. Despite being licensed as principals, women continue to be underrepresented in the role of principal (Bell & Chase, 1993; Bjork, 2000; Eckman, 2004; Mertz & McNeely, 1990; Riehl & Byrd, 1997; Shakeshaft, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001). By creating two principal positions in each school, the coprincipal model provides more opportunities for women to serve as principals. Indeed, several of the high school coprincipals in this study commented on the value of having gender-balanced coprincipal teams and acknowledged that their districts sought to create male-female teams. Surprisingly, 54% of the respondents to the survey in the quantitative phase of this study were females (Eckman, 2006). Perhaps the coprincipalship is more attractive to women and may thus offer a way to bring more women into principalship positions. As Gronn and Hamilton (2004) suggest, further research is needed on "the dynamics of co-principalships, particularly in regard to gender combinations" (p. 33).

Given that the role of the traditional solo principal has become more difficult, time consuming, and complex, school districts are beginning to implement alternative leadership models. The coprincipal model is being implemented in many more schools than what I first hypothesized. My searches have led me to 170 persons serving as coprincipals in public and private schools in the United States. I suspect that there may be more school districts using a coprincipal leadership model, as well as more school districts that would be interested in learning how to implement and sustain a successful coprincipal model.

The coprincipal leadership model offers an alternative to the traditional solo principal position and, as such, has the potential to attract and retain qualified people to lead our schools. Further research on the model will increase our understanding of a form of leadership that a number of school districts are already implementing. It would be worthwhile to gain an understanding of how the coprincipal leadership model is perceived and experienced by teachers, parents, and community members. Additionally, it is necessary to investigate

what impact this model has on school effectiveness in terms of student achievement, student discipline, parental involvement, and teacher retention.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.NASSP.org>.

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