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Commentary

Save a Place for Leadership in the Debate on Adequacy: A New Model for Developing Leadership for Schools

Mary Devin

Introduction

In the midst of discussions on adequacy of funding, schools are being held accountable for the success of all students and for raising student performance to the highest level ever. It is not unreasonable to fear that essential requirements for the latter will be overlooked as the debate concerning the former intensifies and that issues of funding the existing school model will divert attention from pertinent questions about how to make a new vision for schooling a reality. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) established the expectation for schools to successfully educate all of the children of all of the people.¹ Approaches to teaching and learning are being reviewed as never before, and emerging research is confirming there is an important and positive relationship between the role of the principal and student learning. Assuring all students receive the benefits of this quality leadership needed for the schools of the future is an issue of adequacy.

The Problem

The number of openings for principals is predicted to grow by 20% by 2008 as baby boomers reach retirement age.² Practitioners worry if there will be enough applicants to fill those vacancies, but the concern goes beyond the numbers. The growing body of evidence on the importance of the principal's role in improving teaching and learning is shifting the focus to quality of preparation for these candidates. Researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto attributed about a quarter of total school effects to direct and indirect effects of leadership.³ McREL researchers found that leadership factors could raise student performance by an average of 10% to 12%. In addition, classrooms look different today due to demographic changes within populations. Building capacity in leaders must be part of effective plans for school improvement.⁴ However, the measure of an effective principal has changed, and a new set of skills is required to create an environment where every child is successful. Preparation programs for administrators must be redesigned to produce candidates with the qualifications required for this work. Those who prepare new administrators and those who supervise principal practitioners must work together to redesign preparation programs and develop ongoing support systems for practitioners. Such collaboration will require

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problem solvers to think creatively and to try new models for delivering traditional services.⁵

A Model to Consider

One such model is the partnering between the Kansas State University (KSU) College of Education and local school districts to offer professional leadership academies as an alternative to the traditional program for preparing principals for state certification. These field-based, intense administrator degree training programs are promising examples of the success that can come from careful planning and collaboration in organizing human resources for best support of success for every child and for maximum return on financial resources invested. For several years, the Department of Educational Administration and Leadership at KSU had joined with school districts to provide professional growth activities for aspiring building leaders. However, for the most part, faculty in the department continued to deliver these services in a fashion not greatly different than before. In the fall of 1999, the pattern began to change.

The idea for the change grew out of informal conversations over time between the superintendents of three school districts and faculty in the department, who prepared educators for state certification as building principals and/or district level leaders. The three superintendents, all of whom had received their own training in the traditional program in this department at KSU, were becoming increasingly concerned about sustaining quality leadership in their districts over time. State leaders and other demographers were predicting large numbers of retirements in the near future, and these education leaders were already seeing a decline in the number of applicants in the pool for leadership positions, particularly for building principal openings. Each district had raised expectations for building leaders to be effective in leading school improvement and increasing student performance, even before the pressures of NCLB were introduced into the mix. NCLB increased the need for new principals to be effective beginning on the first day on the job, and more research was confirming the importance of leadership for the instructional program.⁶

University staff had become more and more concerned that the traditional preparation program for school administrators did not include enough direct connection to the world of the practitioner to produce the product schools were demanding of the preparation program offered at KSU. About that same time, the Kansas Commission on Teaching and America's Future was working on its report calling for redesign of preparation programs and professional development programs for principals to better prepare them to become instructional leaders.⁷ Superintendents were asking how the training program for new building and district leaders might be strengthened so that new position holders were ready for the challenges of school improvement and "adequate yearly progress" (AYP); and they were most interested in having a voice in what those changes in the program might be. Two of these districts were already partnering as professional development schools for the College of Education's teacher preparation program, and all three superintendents were genuinely impressed with the degree to which this model better prepared teachers they were hiring in their respective districts. They wanted to explore applying the same concepts to a field-based intense preparation program for principals and district level leaders. The department faculty members were just as interested in engaging in such conversations with superintendents.

Driven by these concerns and encouraged by the geographic proximity of the four locations, at the suggestion of the department

chair and with the blessing of the Dean of the College of Education, the superintendents met with the department chair and representative faculty members to explore the possibility of working collectively on such a project. The result was a very successful partnership between three mid-sized Kansas school districts and the Department of Educational Administration and Leadership at a major state university. This Professional Administrative Leadership Academy (PALA) is worthy of consideration as a model for schools across the nation interested in forming partnerships to deliver a quality preparation program for building and district administrators. The steps that follow outline the process.

Step One: Clarify the Purpose and Establish Expectations for the Project

The individuals who were to become the PALA Planning Committee met for the first discussion in May 1999 to address questions that would determine what, if anything, came next. The three superintendents invited key district staff members to be present, and the department chair brought representative professors who were teaching the courses required of prospective public school building and district leaders seeking a Masters degree in Educational Administration and state certification necessary for holding such positions. Shortly after the discussion began, it was evident that there was great interest in working together to develop an alternative to the traditional program of 39 hours of credit packaged in discrete course segments. Each person present committed to serving on a planning committee for a partnership that would address a common problem: Finding an acceptable strategy for increasing the number of well-prepared applicants for future leadership positions in these three districts that would have potential for replication elsewhere.

The group easily compiled a list of obstacles that would have to be resolved if such a partnership were to work. First to come to mind were those practical concerns such as how to bridge the distance gap, time equivalencies, budget costs, etc. However, the group felt that the more important and challenging issues involved clear definition of standards for the outcome they hoped to accomplish and agreement on evidence that would determine if those standards were met. Other questions included which group to target (practicing or future administrators or both), how participants would be selected, who would deliver the program, how responsibilities would be divided among the partnering entities, and what resources were available for such an undertaking. After several months of continuing discussions, the following expectations were established for the Professional Administrative Leadership Academy:

- The purpose of PALA would be to increase the pool of qualified candidates for future leadership openings in the participating districts. The cohort group would be limited to 24 participants, with eight slots available to each district.
- PALA would have a two-tiered structure. Participants completing the first year would need to apply to continue for a second year, for which membership would be limited to participants accepted from year one.
- If selected, participants would have to meet the requirements for entry to the Graduate School at Kansas State University. Individuals successfully completing PALA would meet requirements for a Kansas certificate for building leadership and a Masters degree in Educational Administration from the university.

- The course work would be rigorous and equivalent to the 39 hours required in the traditional program for building certification, but would be field-based with rich opportunities for application of theory and skills presented.
- The services of PALA would be the joint responsibility of the department faculty and the three participating districts. Coursework would comprise one-third of the focus of PALA, and the other two-thirds would be supervised application.
- The department would have the primary role in delivery of information. The districts would assume responsibility for field-based connections and would assign practicing principals as mentors to participants for the duration of their program.
- While the three districts would have autonomy in establishing opportunities and guidelines for field experiences for members from their respective districts, program standards and expectations of performance would be the same for all participants in PALA.
- The PALA program would include class work and individual and small group projects. Students would be expected to take the initiative required to be responsible for their own professional growth.

Step Two: Identify the Process for Selecting Participants

The planning committee developed eligibility requirements and the application/selection process for identifying 24 participants. Each district would form its own selection committee and identify up to eight participants from its respective staff that met the established criteria. To assist with the selection process, all applicants would be given the SRI Principal Perceiver. How that score was used would be at the discretion of the respective districts. As the last step in the selection process, the planning committee would review the recommended list of participants from each district and give final approval to the 24-member group.

The planning committee continued to meet over the next several months to finalize details of the partnership. A brochure, developed by the committee and published by the department, was created to introduce the opportunity, establish the eligibility requirements, and announce the application process that would be uniform in all three locations. The brochure and an application form were distributed to faculty in the three participating districts. A timeline was established for selection in early fall, and the first class session was set for the first week in February 2000.

Step Three: Identify Resources Available and Construct a Budget

Budgets were tight in each district; so it was important to estimate the budget impact of any new program. The planning committee members realized they would need to assure the three boards of education that adding this project within the budget year would not deprive other programs of necessary support. At the heart of budget planning was assigning responsibility for PALA services across the four partners. The department chair was willing to redirect some resources in his budget and had also been assured of some budget support from the College of Education Dean, who was encouraging the group to pursue this project. The superintendents were willing to provide human resources and to designate dollars in related areas of their budgets to the extent possible.

The partners looked at what resources were already there and

concluded that the department faculty would serve as instructors as appropriate and as supplemented by contributions from the three superintendents, who served as adjunct instructors for the department from time-to-time. No new budget resources would be required for this part of the partnership. The department chair offered special one-time only resources from his budget to provide stipends for mentors and other professional staff that would be needed to assist with the field-based connections. The superintendents committed district resources to provide materials, including textbooks and other incidental costs. An ongoing commitment to professional development of staff was a characteristic common to each of the four partners. The planners recognized that pertinent staff development resources were already scheduled across the three districts and the College of Education that could be opened to all 24 PALA participants with little if any additional resources required. The pooling of quality staff development programs already in place and directly related to the content standards established for PALA substantially reduced budget issues for the planners.

Although other options were discussed at length, it was agreed that tuition costs would be the responsibility of PALA members themselves. The total cost to each district was estimated at \$20,000 for each year although the actual expenses were well below that amount for each of the two years. The budget items established during planning were:

- Substitute days (eight days per year per participant) to accommodate PALA members observations and field assignments;
- Stipend for instructors and mentors;
- Text materials and supplies;
- Purchased services such as outside speakers and related expenses;
- Meals for evening class sessions;
- Travel for field-based experiences and site visits;
- SRI Principal Perceiver screener as part of the selection process;
- Summer stipends, if necessary.

Fiscal responsibility for most of the above belonged to the respective school districts. However, the KSU Department of Educational Administration was responsible for purchased services, such as outside speakers and related expenses. With regard to stipends for instructors, district experts supplemented university staff.

Step Four: Determine Program Content and Establish Program Standards

With the purpose clear and a general vision in place, the planning committee began the important task of articulating the curriculum and establishing content standards. This was the most challenging step in the planning process. The group looked at academy models for training prospective administrators from other states and at two earlier department efforts in Kansas—one that did not encompass a total preparation program and one that aimed at developing professional skills of staff who had already completed the program, but were still seeking their first administrative assignment. While these models did target development of leadership skills, they did not increase the number of candidates with state certificates, nor did they produce an alternative model for preparation of administrators. None were comprehensive preparation programs resulting in a Masters degree and state certification.

The traditional program of preparing building administrators at KSU consisted of a specified list of discrete courses, taught independent

of one another. Academy planners envisioned an integrated, spiraling curriculum, with rich opportunities for students to grow from both vicarious and mastery experiences. They were looking for a curriculum that would take selected staff members with demonstrated leadership potential through a two year period of study and application experiences and produce highly qualified candidates for leadership openings sure to occur in future years. They wanted a program with leadership for student achievement as the central theme. Materials would be selected from current writings connecting pertinent knowledge and emerging research to practice in their own districts. District staff would help instructors connect class sessions to meaningful authentic experiences, and practicing principals would mentor students as they applied information addressed in direct instruction to real situations. The planners envisioned experiences that would produce networks of professional support for the participants that would continue long after the experience ended.

The planning committee knew they needed a curriculum that satisfied university standards for accreditation by NCATE, met the requirements of the Kansas State Department of Education for building leadership certification, and honored the standards for leadership that were emerging from the profession. Early in the planning process, the committee reviewed the NCATE Curriculum Guidelines for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership 1994;⁸ ISLLC Standards;⁹ the 21 competencies for principals identified by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration,¹⁰ and other current writings on assessing the performance of principals.¹¹

The planning committee reached agreement on a structure for program content that it believed would meet its criteria. The ISLLC Standards were selected as the general framework for the curriculum, with attention to knowledge, dispositions, and performance under each of the six standards. The National Policy Board's 21 competencies would spiral through all six standards and field experiences. To assist instructors in planning, the committee specified which leadership competencies from the list of 21 identified by the National Policy Board would be addressed under each of the six ISLLC standards in PALA over the two-year time frame. Several of the competencies appeared under more than one standard, assuring multiple opportunities for professional growth of participants. Although the group believed strongly that the standards and the competencies overlapped and could not be treated discretely, the members established further guidelines for what proportion of time would be devoted to each of the six standards. Because of the already established importance of instructional leadership for all partners, it was agreed that 35% of the available time for instruction would be devoted to Standard II, which would address nine of the 21 competencies. Standards I, III, and IV would each receive 15% of the academy time, and Standards V and VI were given 10% time allotments apiece. A matrix was constructed to show how the 21 competencies were spiraled across the standards to emphasize the connections between them.

To determine the specifics of what materials and activities would be used to deliver the concepts of each, the six standards were assigned among the respective partner school districts according to the particular district's demonstrated interest and expertise in an area. Department faculty who had taught the traditional courses would work with all three districts matching their own areas of expertise across the six standards. District responsibilities were assigned equitably with respect to established time proportions. Thus one district with recognized success in raising student results took Standard II (35% of the academy

time), and the remaining five standards were split between the other two districts. For each standard, the responsible district worked with appropriate department faculty to develop an outline of curriculum content and suggested activities. These proposed outlines were presented to the planning committee who reviewed the overall two-year program of study. Special care was taken to make sure appropriate opportunities for meaningful field experiences were included under each standard. When the group was satisfied that the standards were adequately addressed and that the PALA program matched the rigor of the traditional one with added enhancements of appropriate direct and guided applications in the field, the planning committee adopted the curriculum and formally established the performance outcome for the Professional Administrative Leadership Academy.

The brochure soliciting applicants stated: "Participants who successfully complete the academy will have demonstrated proficiency in certain learning expectations that are aligned with the standards set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), the Curriculum Guidelines for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the 21 Competency areas formulated by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration." The careful attention to the development of the program of study before the academy began took considerable time but was a key factor in the success of this new model for administrative training.

Step Five: Assessing Student Progress at the End of Year One

The planning committee outlined evaluation measures for PALA, focusing on the performance criteria for the ISLLC standards and based on the established expectation that participants would accept responsibility for their own professional development and demonstrate the skills necessary to direct their future growth. Performance was expected to increase over the two years of participation. With that in mind, specific points of assessment were identified for the first year:

- *Progress on the required Masters portfolio.* The KSU College of Education's Department of Educational Administration and Leadership required a student portfolio in the traditional program, and the planning committee wanted that to be the culminating assessment for PALA participants also. It was agreed that the student portfolio would be organized to reflect the student's mastery of knowledge, dispositions, and successful performance under each of the six ISLLC standards. By the end of the first year, participants would demonstrate an understanding of organization of the portfolio and use artifacts to demonstrate proficiency on the standards. Most importantly, they would be able to articulate areas of need for their own professional growth during the final year and to select appropriate field experiences to address those needs.

- *Reflection on experiences, personal growth, and beliefs.* Academy assignments would be designed to develop the habit of reflection as a powerful tool for self-improvement. Instructors would provide frequent feedback to participants throughout PALA and participants would be required to periodically reflect on their educational philosophy and personal belief statements as educators. They would analyze their own writings, noting professional growth resulting from their experiences.

- *A log of mentoring activities.* Students would keep a brief summary record of all mentoring activities over the two years. Mentors would assist in providing feedback on professional growth to the planning committee and to the student. At the completion of the first year,

students would complete a self-assessment of the how mentored experiences contributed to the development of the 21 competencies.

- *Feedback from mentors.* Mentors and students would jointly complete a rubric assessing the competencies listed under each standard, reaching consensus on the assessment. Mentors would also complete another assessment of the student performance as developed by the superintendent.

- *Personal interview.* At the end of the first year, the members of the planning committee from the home district and a representative of the department faculty would interview each participant. Academy students would lead their own interview, which would consist of a review of the portfolio organization and contents and the personal reflections on performance on each of the standards. Students would be responsible for presenting evidence of knowledge, dispositions, and performance in the six standards and for identifying the areas where more experiences would be needed during the final year. The student's ability to lead the interview would be an important measure of professional growth.

- *Reapplication.* Students would formally apply for continued participation in Year Two of PALA.

Step Six: Assessing Student Performance at the End of Year Two

Assessment measures for the end of program were originally established tentatively, but remained substantially unchanged at the close of the two-year period. The assessments were outlined as follows:

1. The portfolio would be in final form, meeting all requirements for reflection, and including evidence of proficiency in the areas represented by the six standards. Students would select evidence from their class assignments, experiences with mentors, and from special projects. The contents of the portfolio would be evidence of student satisfactory completion of PALA requirements.

2. Each participant would select and complete a major service project during Year Two and create and deliver a presentation summarizing the work and its results. This presentation would be delivered in front of the class and their respective mentors. The planning committee would reach consensus on assessment of the presentations.

3. Mentors would complete an assessment of the students' demonstrated preparedness for leadership positions, noting strengths and areas for continuing growth.

4. End-of-Academy interviews would be conducted in similar fashion to those conducted at the end of the first year. Academy participants would be responsible for leading the conversation around their portfolio and the professional growth its contents represent. A rubric for assessing the interview was developed. The student's ability to plan for continuing professional growth beyond PALA would be an important part of the assessment.

The home district determined grades for the participants, with the planning committee's approval after reviewing all proposed assessments to maintain consistency of standards. Information included written assessments from the mentoring principal. The final rubric for PALA participation used four levels of performance— Awareness, Emerging, Proficient, and Distinguished— for each of six criteria: (1) Articulation of philosophy (changes noted); (2) commitment to administration; (3) understanding of the standards; (4) evidence of performance of the standards; (5) ability to project needs for future growth; and (6) vision for organization and use of the portfolio.

Step Seven: Determining the Overall Success of the Academy

During those early planning sessions, the committee believed that PALA would be a success if it produced an increase in the number of qualified candidates for future leadership positions. Twenty students completed PALA. Three of the original 23 students selected for PALA did not apply for participation in Year Two. One elected to return to the traditional program, and two who entered PALA with credits from the traditional program completed their degree and certification requirements in the first year. PALA had increased the number of candidates available for administrative openings in the three districts and for that reason alone might have been correctly labeled a success. However, the matter of quality of preparedness had also been established as a further criterion of success.

Although formal follow-up of the participants' later assignments has not yet been completed, across the three districts participants went on to positions of increased leadership responsibility in a variety of assignments. For example, in one of the districts, all eight are now in building or district office administrator assignments. Clearly this was the measure of success sought by the partners. However, a number of other noteworthy and enduring outcomes of this partnership have come to light. One of the district partners reported these benefits to the board of education following the conclusion of PALA:

- The number of qualified candidates for leadership positions was increased.
- District leaders participating on the planning committee grew professionally as they interacted with KSU faculty and were stimulated by the responses of PALA participants.
- Many of the special projects completed by the participants contributed directly to school improvement efforts at the building level and produced positive results for students.
- PALA participants shared their experiences often with other district teachers and administrators, extending the professional growth beyond the eight directly involved.
- Mentors cited their own growth as they worked with the PALA students in problem solving situations.
- KSU faculty introduced the staff to additional resources that are useful in professional growth of the district's practicing administrators.
- The close working relationship between the district and the university rose to yet another level. The direct involvement with district staff and programs gave university representatives a greater understanding of and respect for quality programs in the district.
- The district staff gained better understanding of the program standards the university programs must meet and greater appreciation for the expertise of the university staff.
- Opportunities increased for future collaboration between the university and districts.

Reflecting on the Success of the Professional Administrative Leadership Academy

Looking back on the process for establishing and conducting such a markedly different approach to preparing for the principalship, several things can be cited as contributing to its success.

- *Trust among the partners.* The partners shared a common concern and began problem solving with excellent relationships in place among all individuals involved. They acknowledged the project

created potential for disagreement over philosophy, past practices, and resources, but the trust in place made the chance of success far too great not to proceed. The same foundation of trust allowed the members to complete the division of resources and work responsibility smoothly and to find an acceptable balance between uniform standards and district autonomy. The support of the Dean of the College of Education and the chair of the department, and the respect of the superintendents for each other created an attitude of confidence that the resources needed would be available without unfairly burdening any of the partners.

- *Strong staff development programs already in place.* All of the districts and the university had a long-standing commitment to quality staff development programs. The partners had collaborated in the past and were comfortable with the common values and basic assumptions that were shared concerning professional growth and the philosophy of learning.

- *Willingness to take risks to get better and accept new models.* The participating entities were committed to continuous improvement and approached problem solving with a positive "can do" attitude. The staff members from the districts and the participating professors from the university were open to changing their own practices if it were in the best interest of students.

- *Direct involvement of decisionmakers in the planning process.* The leadership of the department chair, the encouragement from the Dean, and the participation of the chief administrative position holder from each district empowered the planning committee with the authority to move ideas to actions effectively.

- *Very thorough attention to planning.* This may have been the most important factor of all. Long before conducting the first session with participants, the planning committee had a strong, comprehensive plan in place. Although not many changes were necessary, the committee continued to meet frequently during the two years and to reflect constantly on its plan. Members were prepared to make adjustments as prudent.

Concluding Comments

The Professional Administrative Leadership Academy, developed through collaboration between Kansas State University and three school districts, provides a model worthy of consideration by those who believe leadership is an issue of adequacy. Five years after that first planning meeting in May 1999, the pool of eligible candidates for administrative positions in the three partnering districts is again becoming a topic of discussion. One of the three districts is at the mid-point of a second academy on its own, and another is planning a second endeavor with new partner for Spring 2005. The KSU Department of Educational Leadership (renamed in 2004) continues to expand application of the PALA model. The Spring 2005 academy will be the ninth for KSU, and its planners are using a model very similar to the one developed for PALA.

The Professional Administrative Leadership Academy model emerged from a holistic approach to addressing a problem and produced an alternative model for preparing principals that has great potential for replication elsewhere. The three districts and the university staff had much in common, but they each also brought individual issues and their own strengths and resources to the table. The program, as envisioned by the planners and delivered, is affirmed in recent research on principal preparation programs. In a report for the Southern Regional Education Board, Bottoms et al. listed six strategies, drawn

from research and direct experiences in schools, universities and state agencies, that state and local leaders can use to secure an ample supply of highly qualified principals.¹² Three of them closely paralleled the framework established for PALA:

- The participants were selected for PALA because they already demonstrated leadership skills in their respective districts. (Strategy 1: Single out high-performers.)
- The leadership preparation program was redesigned with emphasis on student achievement. (Strategy 2: Recalibrate preparation programs.)
- Field-based experiences were a central focus of the program. (Strategy 3: Emphasize real-world training.)

A fourth recommendation in the report is linking principal licensure to performance. That change became effective in Kansas on July 1, 2004.

Endnotes

¹ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Public Law 107-110.

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³ Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom, "Executive Summary: How Leadership Influences Student Learning," *Learning from Leadership Project* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Toronto, Ontario: University of Minnesota Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and University of Toronto, Ontario, Institute for Studies in Education, 2004).

⁴ Tim Waters, Robert J. Marzano and Brian McNulty, "Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement," a working paper (Aurora, Colorado: McREL, 2003.)

⁵ Gene Bottoms, Kathy O'Neill, Betty Fry, and David Hill, *Good Principals Are the Key to Successful Schools: Six Strategies to Prepare More Good Principals* (Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Regional Education Board, March 2003).

⁶ Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, *Research You Can Use to Improve Results* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 1999), 37-39.

⁷ The Kansas Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *Put Students First: A Competent, Caring and Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom. An Action Plan for Kansas Public Education in the 21st Century* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas School of Education, Institute for Educational Research and Public Service, May 2000).

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¹⁰ National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Principals for Our Changing Schools: Knowledge and Skills Base* (Fairfax, Virginia: 1992).

¹¹ Linda Skria, David A. Erlandson, Eileen M. Reed, and Alfred P. Wilson, *The Emerging Principals* (Larchmont, New York: Eye On Education, Inc., 2001).

¹² Bottoms et al., 3-10.