School Principals' Conceptual Skills and Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Kakamega County

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to establish how school principals' conceptual skills influence students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County.

Methods: The study made use of a correlation research design. A total of 3,350 teachers, 276 deputy principals, 1104 heads of departments, and 276 principals of secondary schools in Kakamega County make up the target population of 5006 subjects. The study sampled 152 respondents, which comprised 8 principals, 8 deputy principals, 34 HODs, and 102 teachers. Stratified simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were applied to sample participants who were 152. Questionnaires were used to collect data from teachers, deputy principals, and heads of departments, and an interview guide for the principals. Inferential statistics which included regression analysis was used to determine how the independent factors affect the dependent variable.

Results: The study found that principals' conceptual skills had a positive and significant effect on academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County.

Conclusion: Ensuring teachers understand the vision and mission of the school which is the responsibility of the school principal enhances the school performance. The principal should however provide guidance to the teachers on ways to achieve the school's vision and mission. Policymakers who make school-related policies should formulate a policy that will guide the TSC when posting principals to only post those who are competent in conceptual skills.

Keywords: *Leadership skills, conceptual skills, academic performance*

1. Introduction

School principals are known to be the overall supervisors and managers of every activity taking place in school. Their main responsibility is to determine how the school will run while putting into consideration the laid down guidelines and especially instructional supervision in the school (Lemos & Veríssimo, 2014). Principals therefore require leadership skills that will allow them to relate to the process of teaching. According to Prince (2012), the principal is required to have the basic skills of interacting with teachers, students, and the school curriculum. These skills of leadership are essential in managing the teachers by motivating them to achieve the curriculum goals. The principal is in charge of overseeing the instructors to ensure that the pupils receive worthwhile educational experiences. According to Reed (2010), leadership is an

act that enhances practices such as supervision and evaluation of instruction, communicating of school goals, protection of instructional time, framing school goals, coordination of the curriculum, maintaining high promotion of professional development, monitoring of students' progress, offering rewards to both teachers and pupils as a means of motivation. These abilities of principals are linked to a conducive learning and teaching environment, better curriculum delivery, and good performance. Among the leadership skills is the conceptual skills.

Conceptual skills are the ability to work with ideas and concepts (Marshall, 2008). A conceptually skilled leader feels at ease discussing the complex concepts and ideas that form an organization. He or she is skilled at communicating the objectives of the business and has a solid understanding of the economic concepts that influence it (Megheirkouni, Amaugo & Jallo, 2018). Conceptual leaders are at ease working with abstractions and theoretical ideas. The development of an organization's vision and strategic plan requires conceptual expertise. Conceptual talent is the ability to mentally shape the meaning of organizational or policy issues; it is the capacity to comprehend the goals and values of a corporation and to determine where it should go (Ghalandari, 2012).

Kenyan principals lack the necessary skills to handle problems and challenges brought on by leadership (Cakir, 2019). The Teacher's Service Commission (TSC) has however failed to provide leadership training to teachers in preparation for leadership. Moreover, it would be expected that TSC provides pre-training for leadership to principals who are being hired, which is however missing (Kabarata, 2023). The only training programs that are being provided by TSC are mentorship and coaching. In this, institutional heads are mostly trained as mentees to mentor teachers who have just been recruited (Echaune & Maiyo, 2023). Nonetheless, coaching and mentoring are centered on a participatory learning approach, which enhances rather than replaces the immediate supervisor's responsibility in providing on-the-job training and development. It does not, however, impart leadership abilities.

1.1 Problem Statement

Education is very important in an increasingly globalized and technological world, as such; academic performance of learners in schools is critical. Over the recent past years, majority of the public secondary schools within Kakamega County have not yielded good performance in national examinations. Since 2017, Kakamega County's mean score of the K.C.S.E results has been on the decline from 3.795 in 2017 to 3.486 in 2021. This trend of dismal performance has caused constant complaints by stakeholders in the education sector within Kakamega County which needs to be addressed. Previous studies have linked principals' leadership skills to improved academic performance at a global level. This study therefore proposes to investigate principals' conceptual skills and their influence on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish how school principals' conceptual skills influence students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

This research used Katz's talent theory of leadership, which he developed in 1955. This talent hypothesis states that a leader's skills, knowledge, and abilities are necessary for success in all endeavors. It focused on how leaders use their skills to effectively carry out jobs. A leader should have three basic skills, according to this theory: human skills, technical skills, and

conceptual skills. The three are all basic abilities that are crucial for leaders but each one has a different value. A leader must possess three skills as agreed upon by Katz (1974) as follows; technical, human, conceptual, and administrative abilities were identified as key major leadership skills in a study done in South Carolina (Akinola, 2013).

Leadership abilities are taught, not natural, and anyone may be a leader, according to Katz's skill hypothesis (DeChant, 2022). Appointed school principals should improve school effectiveness by enhancing leadership practices on the job by demonstrating their leadership capabilities - human, technical, and time management skills (Akinola, 2013). As a result, academic performance is dependent on their management abilities together with how the demonstration of their abilities on assigned tasks. Therefore, it is critical to assess their abilities to determine whether or not they are qualified to serve as principals, as well as their impact on students' academic performance. As a result, this skill theory is found to be suitable for this research study, which pertains to assessing the management skills of leaders (technical, human, and time management) of principals and how they influence student academic performance.

The skill theory of leadership was useful to this research work as it summarizes the necessary skills needed for effective leadership. According to the theory, for leaders to be effective, they should have three major leadership skills; human, conceptual, and technical skills. Technical skills majorly entail the level of a leader's proficiency within a certain activity or work. Conceptual skills on the other hand entail the capability of an individual to carry out different tasks using complex ideas or concepts lastly, human skills majorly refer to how people relate to each other within the same work environment. In the same way, the study is trying to examine principal's conceptual skills that are essential in good academic performance.

2.2 Empirical Review

Conceptual skills are the ability of school leaders to think creatively about concepts, methods, or techniques to encourage students and teachers to successfully reach their goals. In this research study and context, the conceptual abilities of leaders include assisting each other in the responsibility of attaining the goals of the institution, addressing difficulties, as well as offering training programs to teachers. Principals serve important responsibilities in educational environments as leaders. Working alone, however, will not result in total educational achievement. Schmidt, Davis, and Bottom (2011) found that school success is achieved when administrators and teachers work together. In this case, teacher labor is necessary for school operations like administration, management, and instructional procedures. Aside from these milestones, the success of a school needs the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders to reduce the workload on principals and teachers.

Principals' conceptual skills refer to their ability to think of new ways to involve teachers in curriculum implementation for achievement of the objectives of the syllabus. Because most important resources in achieving school goals are the teachers, steps should be taken to encourage teachers' commitment to their jobs. Developing innovative ideas for collaborating with parents to boost their commitment, cohesion, and satisfaction is one tactic (Prince, 2012). Parents are motivated and energized to support numerous activities related to curriculum implementation in their children's education, reducing the strain on instructors.

Great leaders consider how to keep all stakeholders focused on achieving the desired outcome (Saeed & Muneer, 2012). For example, via the induction process, socialize newly allocated teachers so that they can fulfill their jobs without delay (Akyeampong, Lussier, Pryor & Westbrook, 2013). Similarly, provide job-related training to instructors to help them cope with shifting curriculum trends (Re'em, 2011). When such a favorable climate for education is

formed, teachers adorn principals (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). Teachers acquire enthusiasm for continuing with activities that assure curriculum implementation when principals understand what they need and supply it.

Instructors are not socialized to the new circumstances due to poor leadership abilities on the part of principals. As a result, they begin professions that are stressful, affecting their dedication, instructional quality, and, as a result, student learning (Peter, Ken & Mark, 2007). With a well-planned induction, the tensions could be alleviated. Induction, on the other hand, is the underutilized component, despite the fact that it keeps instructors focused on the content and allows them to function at their best (Nandi, Hamilton, Harland & Mahmood, 2015). Because of the increasing challenges of the curriculum requirements, badly settled instructors would feel stressed and anxious.

According to Akomolafe (2005), leadership skills entail handling every situation uniquely. In this case, the principal should discern a mechanism for dealing with cases such as failure to understand the curriculum and implement it. The curriculum has specific considerations that guide the teachers on how they can handle various issues. The principals should be equipped with skills to mentor and support staff across departments (Akomolafe, 2005). The skills to mentor entail the comprehension of the learning perspective and the capacity to guide others. The skills to mentor are adequately supplemented by traits such as personal qualities, and the ability to develop self before developing others. Developing skills is an essential entity of leadership skills. It helps in organizing various functions and helps others follow suit. The development of skills is key to implementation of curriculum as it entails organizing every stakeholder in the school activities towards a common goal. In this case, the common goal has been the implementation of the curriculum to help in achieving academic excellence (Mohammad & Muhammad, 2011). The ability to develop comes hand-in-hand with interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are paramount in ensuring there is school principals and teachers are on the same level of understanding. This is because teachers are the main implementers of the curriculum and thus their relationship with the principal is important.

According to UNESCO (2005), the lack of an effective principal is the root cause of a poor connection with parents, which leads to misunderstandings. Also, the acts of leaders are the elements, which restrict parental motivation to establish healthy relationships (Constantino, 2003). According to these viewpoints, negative relationships emerge as a result of administrators' failure to empower parents to participate, comprehend, and add value to the institution, which is then accompanied by disagreements. According to this viewpoint, a sense of belonging to common goals generates a desire for togetherness and promotes a good workplace atmosphere - purposeful, orderly, devoid of bodily damage, and favorable to teaching (Lezotte, 2001). Teachers' and students' challenges are alleviated by efforts and a sense of belonging. As a result, student discipline issues such as aggressive conduct, wild behavior, and disruptions are eliminated.

Studies have shown that school administrators' conceptual skills have an impact on how well their institutions perform. For instance, Kaggwa, Onen & Kimoga, 2016) conducted research to determine whether principals' performance in leading primary public schools was significantly impacted by their conceptual skills. The outcomes demonstrated a statistically significant (p-0.0042) impact of principals' conceptual abilities on performance. The study thus disproved the null hypothesis, which claimed that the performance of principals was unaffected by their ability to administer their curriculum. The study demonstrated the importance of principals' conceptual skills in the performance of principals which would eventually lead to a higher performance of schools. However, the study was conducted among primary schools.

Kiragu (2015) did a study in Kenya's Mathioya Sub County to ascertain how the functions of principals impact pupils' performance. The examination of the data revealed that the majority of the sampled schools lacked adequate supervision of the teaching staff. Many schools lacked adequate supplies that students and teachers could use during class. In addition, teachers' class attendance was not monitored which contributed to poor performance of learners. It was concluded that principals' ability to provide supervision in schools influences learners' academic achievement. Recommendation was made to the MOE to empower principals in supervision of implementation of curriculum and instruction processes in their schools through in-service training. This study is informative however, the findings from primary schools may not apply to secondary schools, and hence, it is essential to conduct this research.

Mwikali (2018) sought to understand how pupils' performance on the KCSE in Mashuru Sub-County was impacted by principals' management of academic progress records. Information was gathered from a sample size of 13 administrators, 54 instructors, and 56 student leaders who were chosen at random using questionnaires and interview schedules. SPSS was utilized to analyze the data using frequencies and percentages. The study concluded that the way principals handled academic progress records had an impact on student's performance in the KCSE, which in turn affected the quality of the exam grades received in the sub-county. This implies that principals' conceptual skills affect the performance of students.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This section consists of different variables, which were utilized by the researcher to achieve set objectives. According to Creswell (2016), a conceptual framework is a link between dependent variable and independent variable.

Independent variable   **Dependent variable**
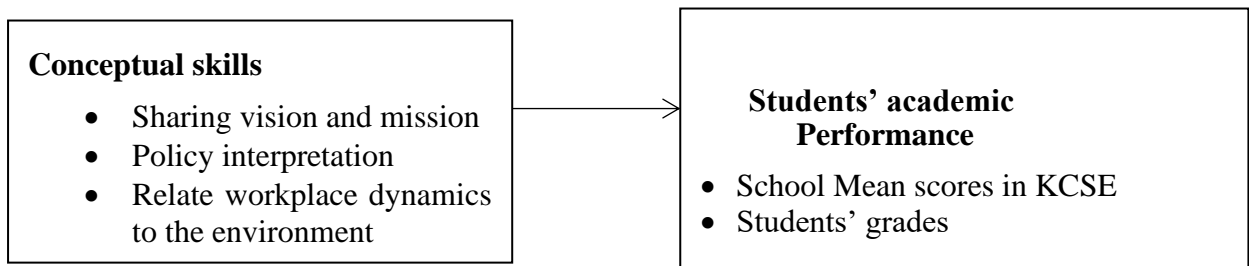

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

The study made use of a correlation research design. A total of 3,350 teachers, 276 deputy principals, 1104 heads of departments, and 276 principals of secondary schools in Kakamega County make up the target population of 5006 subjects. The study sampled 152 respondents, which comprised 8 principals, 8 deputy principals, 34 HODs, and 102 teachers. Stratified simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were applied to sample participants who were 152. Questionnaires were used to collect data from teachers, deputy principals, and heads of departments, and an interview guide for the principals. The instruments were tested for content validity through expert judgment from educational experts and reliability through Cronbach alpha. A reliability index above 0.70 was acceptable for this study. Inferential statistics which included regression analysis was used to determine how the independent factors affect the dependent variable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Principals' Conceptual Skills

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of principals' conceptual skills on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. The teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the statements on conceptual skills. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Results for Conceptual Skills (Teachers)

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. dev
The principal ensures that all the teachers understand the vision and mission of the school	16.50%	1.10%	4.40%	14.30%	63.70%	4.08	1.49
The principal provides guidance on ways to achieve the school's vision and mission	11.00%	6.60%	8.80%	18.70%	54.90%	4.00	1.38
The principal organizes meetings to sensitize teachers and students on school policies	5.50%	5.50%	12.10%	20.90%	56.00%	4.16	1.18
The principal ensures proper implementation of school policies by all staff and students	4.40%	13.20%	3.30%	33.00%	46.20%	4.03	1.20
Organizes seminars for teachers to update their knowledge and skills	5.50%	15.40%	6.60%	40.70%	31.90%	3.78	1.21
Make sure Department heads carry out induction programs for teachers who are newly employed.	7.70%	6.60%	14.30%	45.10%	26.40%	3.76	1.15
Urge seasoned educators to support one another in their professional endeavors.	1.10%	2.20%	4.40%	44.00%	48.40%	4.36	0.77

Source: Field Data (2024)

The results showed that majority of the respondents who were 78.0% agreed with the statement that the principal ensures that all the teachers understand the vision and mission of the school (mean=4.08, std.dev=1.49). This denotes that the principals of schools in Kakamega County ensured that their teachers understood the school mission. Based on this, it can be deduced that the principals understand the necessity of having followers who understand the vision which could make their leadership role easier. Having teachers who understand the vision and mission means that they can work towards accomplishment of the same. According to Kouraogo and

Ouedraogo (2009), great principals are known for their favorable regard, warm interpersonal relationships, and staff friendliness in this regard.

Further results showed that majority of the respondents who were 73.6% agreed with the statement that the principal provides guidance on ways to achieve the school's vision and mission (mean=4.00, std.dev=1.38). This indicates that the principals of schools in Kakamega County ensured that their teachers understood the school mission. This shows that the principals understand that to achieve the vision and mission, they need teachers to be on board which can only be achieved through proper guidance. This was in agreement with Akomolafe (2005) that principals should be equipped with skills to mentor and support staff across departments.

In addition, majority of the respondents who were 76.9% agreed with the statement that the principal organizes meetings to sensitize teachers and students on school policies (mean=4.16, std.dev=1.18). This denotes that the principals of schools in Kakamega County held meetings with teachers to take them through the school policies. By sensitizing the teachers and students, the principal can make their work easier since everyone understands what should and should not be done hence reducing cases of indiscipline. Therefore, principals spend a lot of time talking about their main responsibilities and school policies (Luthans, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010).

Results also revealed that majority of the respondents who were 79.2% agreed with the statement that the principal ensures proper implementation of school policies by all staff and students (mean=4.03, std.dev=1.20). This infers that the principals of schools in Kakamega County made sure that the teachers and the learners implemented the school policies correctly. This ensures that everything is done based on the policies without surpassing the boundaries which could make it difficult for the principals to provide leadership. Therefore, principals spend a lot of time talking about their main responsibilities and school policies (Luthans, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010).

In addition, majority of the respondents who were 72.6% agreed with the statement that the principals organize seminars for teachers to update their knowledge and skills (mean=3.78, std.dev=1.21). This infers that the principals of schools in Kakamega County held seminars for the teachers. This means that the principals understand the necessity of having knowledgeable and skilled teachers since they can effectively deliver their duties hence making the work of leadership easier. Results also revealed that majority of the respondents who were 71.5% agreed with the statement that made sure department heads carry out induction programs for teachers who are newly employed (mean=3.76, std.dev=1.15). This denotes that the principals of schools in Kakamega County made sure that the teachers went through the induction programs. Induction programs ensure that the new teachers can adapt quickly which may harness their effectiveness at work. Therefore, principals have taken up the responsibility of taking the teachers through the induction programs (Luthans, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010).

Results also revealed that majority of the respondents who were 92.4% agreed with the statement that the principals urged seasoned educators to support one another in their professional endeavors (mean=4.36, std.dev=0.67). This infers that the principals of schools in Kakamega County urged seasoned educators to support one another in their professional endeavors. By supporting one another, the teachers can work as a team making it easier for the principals to guide them since they can have one mind reducing conflicts. The study findings agreed with Schmidt et al. (2011) found that school success is achieved when administrators and teachers work together.

The deputy principals were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on principal's conceptual skills. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Results for Conceptual Skills (Deputy Principals)

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. dev
The principal develops a shared vision and mission with the staff	0.00%	0.00%	28.60%	28.60%	42.90%	4.14	0.90
The principal collects ideas, opinions, and aspirations of all staff members when developing the vision and mission of the school activities	0.00%	14.30%	14.30%	42.90%	28.60%	3.86	1.07
The principal uses various methods to engage the staff in developing the vision and mission	0.00%	0.00%	28.60%	14.30%	57.10%	4.29	0.95
The principal can critically analyze policies in the school	0.00%	14.30%	0.00%	42.90%	42.90%	4.14	1.07
The principal understands the implications of each policy	0.00%	28.60%	0.00%	42.90%	28.60%	3.71	1.25
The principal can guide the school staff to relate well with each other and with the community	14.30%	28.60%	0.00%	57.10%	0.00%	3.00	1.29
The principal encourages the staff to have proper interpersonal relations and to compete in a healthy manner	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	42.90%	57.10%	4.57	0.53

Source: Field Data (2024)

The result showed that majority of the respondents who were 71.5% agreed with the statement that the principal develops a shared vision and mission with the staff (mean=4.14, std.dev=0.90). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega share the school vision with their staff. This means that the principals understand that the vision and mission are crucial to their success. According to Kouraogo and Ouedraogo (2009), great principals are known for their favorable regard, warm interpersonal relationships, and staff friendliness in this regard.

Further outcomes showed that majority of the respondents who were 71.5% agreed with the statement that the principal collects ideas, opinions, and aspirations of all staff members when developing the vision and mission of the school activities (mean=3.86, std.dev=1.07). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega County engage the teachers when developing the school vision. It can be deduced that the principal understands that by having staff members participating in developing the mission and vision statement, they can understand it better and hence work towards accomplishing it. This was in agreement with Akomolafe (2005) that principals should be equipped with skills to mentor and support staff across departments.

Further outcomes showed that majority of the respondents who were 71.4% agreed with the statement that the principal uses various methods to engage the staff in developing the vision and mission (mean=4.29, std.dev=0.95). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega County engage the teachers when developing the school vision. This implies that the principals are well-equipped with this conceptual skill. Therefore, principals spend a lot of time talking about their main responsibilities and school policies (Luthans, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010).

In addition, results showed that majority of the respondents who were 85.8% agreed with the statement that the principal can critically analyze policies in the school (mean=4.14, std.dev=1.07). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega analyze the school policies. As such, the principals can properly guide the staff members into following each of the policies. Therefore, principals have taken up the responsibility of taking the teachers through the induction programs (Luthans, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010).

Further outcomes showed that majority of the respondents who were 71.5% agreed with the statement that the principal understands the implications of each policy (mean=3.71, std.dev=1.25). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega have an understanding of the implications of each policy. Therefore, the principals can guide the staff members into ensuring that none of the policies are bypassed hence avoiding cases of non-adherence. In addition, results showed that majority of the respondents who were 57.1% agreed with the statement that the principal can guide the school staff to relate well with each other and with the community (mean=3.00, std.dev=1.29). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega enhance harmony among the teachers. By having harmony, the school can run well without interference as everyone knows their positions in achieving the success of the school. Further outcomes showed that all the respondents agreed with the statement that the principal encourages the staff to have proper interpersonal relations and to compete in a healthy manner (mean=4.57, std.dev=0.53). This infers that most of the principals in Secondary schools in Kakamega enhance harmony among the teachers. This makes it easier for the principals to lead them. The study findings agreed with Schmidt et al. (2011) found that school success is achieved when administrators and teachers work together.

4.2 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was done to determine the effect of independent variables (conceptual skills, human relational skills) on a dependent variable (Academic performance).

Table 2: Regression of Coefficient

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
(Constant)	-0.473	0.449		-1.053	0.295
Conceptual skills	0.613	0.137	0.433	4.491	0.000

Source: Field Data (2024)

The objective was to establish the influence of principals' technical skills on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. The hypothesis; H_{02}: *there is no significant influence of Principals' conceptual skills on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County*. Regression outcomes showed that principals' conceptual skills had a positive and significant effect on academic performance (β=0.433, p=0.000). Therefore, the p-value was less than 0.05, and thus the study rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that there is a significant influence of Principals' conceptual skills on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. This means that if the conceptual skills of the principal increase so perform students. The study findings agreed with Schmidt et al. (2011) who found that school success is achieved when administrators and teachers work together. The study findings also agreed with Mwikali (2018) who found that principals' conceptual skills affect the performance of students.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that principals' conceptual skills had a positive and significant effect on academic performance in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. Ensuring teachers understand the vision and mission of the school which is the responsibility of the school principal enhances the school performance. The principal should, however, provide guidance to the teachers on ways to achieve the school's vision and mission.

6. Recommendations

Principals of secondary schools in Kakamega County who are intentional about the good academic performance of the learners ought to establish a precise mission and provide opportunities for teams to develop a shared vision. By making the purpose and vision of teamwork well-defined, they provide teachers with a sense of unity and alleviate isolation. The principal also ought to organize meetings to sensitize teachers and students on school policies frequently. The principals should organize seminars frequently for their teachers since it enables them to gain more knowledge and skills. The study makes recommendations that policymakers who make school-related policies should formulate a policy that will guide the TSC when posting principals to only post those who are competent in conceptual skills. They may also formulate a policy to guide in training of principals who may be lacking in this essential skill.

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