Questions for Superintendents Focus Group: August 8 2017
Jeff Stephens, Weber County; Steve Norton, Cache County; Steve Carlsen, Box Elder

Are USU graduates who are principals/administrators in your district:

1. Able to support teachers to differentiate instruction for different students?

This is one of the most difficult things to do. Most of the principals in Carbon were USU graduates. I think they how to, but I’m not sure if we focus on it. If they knew how to do it as a teacher, then they can do it. If not, they don’t venture into that area as a principal. Under the name of response to intervention, I think our people clearly understand that concept and make those applications in the classroom. Principals understand RTI. Some think that you have to personalize learning for every student in the class, which is a misconception. Our folks do a great job understanding and supporting response to intervention.

The students in ASC classes talk about PLCs. How are administrators doing leading those PLCs? It’s a bright spot and they understand it really well. Are they learning it from the program or from the district? They embrace PLCs. It’s strong in the district and then reinforced by the ASC program.

Assessment and use of data has become more of a focus in the ASC program, both at the classroom level and at the school level. Created 2 new classes 5 years ago.

We do know where they graduated from based on the interview.

1. Able to support teachers to meet the needs of students whose first language is not English?

Not an issue in Cache district. It’s not an area of strength, but it’s not an area of concern. Doing SIOP training in Box Elder, which will help.

Would need to find out more to be sure. Weber. Had refugees last year from Africa. Two principals came from USU, and they talked about language and cultural issues. The principals were remarkable in their level of support for these students and their families.

One of the courses addresses diversity and differentiation.

Some principals have a knack for sensing the needs of kids, and some who just don’t grasp it. With schools where there is a high minority population, have to be careful who is put at those schools. Have to know their strengths. A math teacher who struggled with math is great because they can relate to the students who struggle.

1. Able to support teachers create positive learning environments?

That’s one of the standards that is taught to create that culture of positive learning. We really know how important that is now. It’s important for motivation. Collective efficacy, Hattie. We talked to the effective teachers in Price, with high test scores, but they had a more positive learning environment. Principals have to create that culture.

The challenge for a young principal is when the heat is on. We work with developing principals in this area, but when the job pressures are intense it gets much harder. You can’t just talk about it in class. You have to experience the parents, the personnel issues, the challenging kids. They can understand it intellectually, but not be able to provide leadership in this area.

Certain situations will trigger the concepts that were learned in classes.

1. Able to collaborate with other principals/administrators in the district?

Jeff Stephens: Very positive in this area.

Steve Norton: Principals don’t spend a lot of time talking to each other; the ones who are struggling don’t make an effort to find out what their successful peers are doing. They need to understand that it’s efficient and effective to learn from their peers. Agriculture is out in the open, but education is behind closed doors. We’re not good at collaborating and being willing to share.

Steve Carlsen: NFL is the biggest copycat. We can do that too, in education.

1. Able to effectively evaluate and support teachers?

Steve Norton: This is a positive area. Principals are better evaluators than they’ve ever been. We used to have principals quit rather than have to evaluate teachers. You’re no longer just a caretaker of a building and a cheerleader.

Jeff Stephens: In a principal’s role related to evaluation, they have to be both a judge and a coach, just as with Olympic athletes. Not a lot of personal interaction between a judge and an athlete, but the coach is intimately involved in the life of an athlete. Weber wants their principals to lean toward coaching rather than judging. A teacher can sense if the principal is more of a judge than a coach.

The superintendents are a collaborative group.

1. Able to support teachers to making a positive impact on student learning?

Carlsen: Luckily, we’ve seen growth. So there has been an impact.

Norton: The longer you’re in this profession, the more you know that someone is trying to sell you essential oils. But they’re not essential. Principals need to be able to evaluate a curriculum and do the research so that they’re not suckered by a product. Get them to really think about whether it has an impact on student learning. The research is clear on what really makes a difference. The preponderance of research is the key. There’s no easy way to get effective student growth.

Jeff Stephens: Beware of the word fidelity. It means “don’t buy anybody else’s stuff. Just use my stuff.”

Are there any areas that we should pay attention to but we might not be?

Jeff Stephens: Advocacy for schools, the profession, the teacher. If we’re not writing the narrative, someone else will. Those principal jobs are so tough, but it can help them be less reactive.

Norton: Standard areas where they still get in trouble are finances, improper relationships with students.

Carlsen: It’s harder to deal with parents than it used to be. Parents can talk to one principal and feel good and to another and become more

Martin Bates, Granite School District

Doug Jacobs, Morgan County School District

August 15, 2017

Are USU graduates who are principals/administrators in your district:

1. Able to support teachers to differentiate instruction for different students?

Very aware of who graduated from USU. Granite is really diverse, so there’s a lot of differentiation. Nobody graduates from a leadership program really ready for a principal job. Shortage in leadership as well as teachers. So, we have a 3-year induction program for leaders. USU graduates come prepared to take it on, have the foundation that they need. Most come from BYU, U. of Utah, and USU. Some come from out of state, but usually with experience. A smattering of U. of Phoenix folks. USU provides practical preparation and those grads compete better than U. of Utah and BYU. Very pleased with USU principals. The missing special ed law class for administrators is noticeable.

Doug Jacobs: If they come from the classroom, then they have experience in the classroom. One new principal had a good experience, better than a friend of his who went through WGU. The law classes are important.

1. Able to support teachers to meet the needs of students whose first language is not English?

Martin says yes. 150 languages in Granite. This is almost a law class issue, but it’s also the educator attitude. Martin looks at data but also wants to get a feel for the positive environment. Doug says they have about 10 non-White students.

1. Able to support teachers create positive learning environments?

Martin looks for this first, and he focuses on that first, before the data. Doug says it takes a while for them to figure out their vision for the school. Effective administrators lead like a Newfoundland not an Australian shepherd.

1. Able to collaborate with other principals/administrators in the district?

Doug says they’re a small district, so it’s easy to collaborate.

Martin says they have network meetings for clusters of schools. High school principals meet together, elementary principals meet in small groups. Work hard to cross-pollinate those so that it’s not just geographic. They figure out PLCs that way, look at data together.

They’re good team members too. Every principal represents the district and most principals get that. The message is that you work for the district, not the school.

1. Able to effectively evaluate and support teachers?

You do a great job with the admission interviews looking for people who already have some background. Martin says that it’s hard for someone who has never been a teacher to be a principal. If they haven’t experienced this as a teacher, it’s hard for them to do that as a leader.

Doug: big difference between evaluating and supporting. USU grads are great at support, but it also depends on what the district is able to provide in terms of support. Support can be through assigning a quality mentor.

1. Able to support teachers to making a positive impact on student learning?

The data class is important here. This is a different time even than it was 10 years ago. Data is not to catch people but to see what it tells us, what it doesn't tell us, and what instructional decisions it can drive. USU grads come with the foundation to take the next step in this area. Nobody comes out from a program with the total package, but what’s important is that they come out ready to learn.

Doug: They’re ready to think outside of the box. The USU grads have an edge in this area.

1. Anything else that your administrators need that we’re not providing?

Martin brings a set of blueprints to every opening meeting to make a point about standardization and standards. Plugs and switches need to be planned. State board establishes the standards and objectives. Other stuff may be more fun, but we have a job to do according to the established curriculum.

All kindergartners get a t-shirt that says Class of 2030 or whatever. A principal said, wow, that’s what we’re really doing here. Getting them ready for college, and Martin thought duh.