

Archived Information

EDUCATING SCHOOL LEADERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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At a time when America's schools face a critical demand for effective principals and superintendents, the majority of the programs that prepare school leaders range in quality from inadequate to poor.

A new report written by Arthur Levine, the president of Teachers College, Columbia University, provides a critical examination of leadership programs today and a roadmap for improvement. Drawing from a four-year study of schools of education across the country, it offers new insights into the ways in which those programs operate, the incentives that drive them, and the perceptions that deans, faculty, alumni, principals and others have of their performance.

More than 40 percent of the nation's principals, and an even higher percentage of superintendents, can be expected to leave their jobs over the next decade. Those who remain must lead schools and school districts through the profound changes called for under state improvement plans and the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Yet, many of the university-based programs designed to prepare the next generation of educational leaders are engaged in a counterproductive "race to the bottom," in which they compete for students by lowering admission standards, watering down coursework, and offering faster and less demanding degrees.

This downward trend is exacerbated by state and school district policies that reward teachers for taking courses in administration whether or not the material is relevant to their work, and whether or not those courses are rigorous. Additionally, many universities treat leadership education programs as "cash cows," using them to bring in revenue for other parts of the campus and denying them the resources that might enable them to improve.

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Nine Criteria for Judging Program Quality

The report examines the programs themselves and their capacity to educate principals and superintendents in the skills and knowledge necessary to lead today's schools and school systems. It offers a nine-point template for judging the quality of school leadership programs.

1. Purpose: The program's purpose is explicit, focusing on the education of practicing school leaders; the goals reflect the needs of today's leaders, schools, and children; and the definition of success is tied to student learning in the schools administered by the graduates of the program.

2. Curricular coherence: The curriculum mirrors program purposes and goals. The curriculum is rigorous, coherent, and organized to teach the skills and knowledge needed by leaders at specific types of schools and at the various stages of their careers.

3. Curricular balance: The curriculum integrates the theory and practice of administration, balancing study in university classrooms and work in schools with successful practitioners.

4. Faculty composition: The faculty includes academics and practitioners, ideally the same individuals, who are expert in school leadership, up to date in their field, intellectually productive, and firmly rooted in both the academy and the schools. Taken as a whole, the faculty's size and fields of expertise are aligned with the curriculum and student enrollment.

5. Admissions: Admissions criteria are designed to recruit students with the capacity and motivation to become successful school leaders.

6. Degrees: Graduation standards are high and the degrees awarded are appropriate to the profession.

7. Research: Research carried out in the program is of high quality, driven by practice, and useful to practitioners and/or policy makers.

8. Finances: Resources are adequate to support the program.

9. Assessment: The program engages in continuing self-assessment and improvement of its performance.

Findings

Of the roughly 250,000 school- and district-level administrators currently employed in the United States, nearly all were trained at schools of education, mostly in programs devoted to educational administration. Over a period of almost two decades, however, those programs—which number more than 600—have faced a steady stream of criticism, their reputations have declined, and their future has been thrown into doubt.

Anticipating an increasing need for school principals and superintendents, and concerned about the quality of educational administration programs, many states have created alternative routes into administrative jobs, and they have encouraged for-profit institutions, non-profits, and school systems themselves to launch programs to prepare administrators. As of 2003, a majority of states either had no requirements for senior school administrative positions, provided alternative pathways to certification, or granted exceptions that allow candidates without education school preparation to become superintendents and principals.

In the years ahead, the number of states offering alternative pathways can be expected to grow. But even with the surge in competition, most education schools have continued to

do business as usual, all the while ignoring their critics.

Specifically, this study finds that university-based educational administration programs suffer from:

Curricular Disarray: Few programs provide a coherent and rigorous curriculum specifically designed to give principals and superintendents the preparation they need. Rather, most seem intent on helping students meet the minimum certification requirements with the least amount of effort, using the fewest university resources. Typically, the curriculum amounts to little more than a grab bag of the survey classes—such as Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education, Educational Psychology, and Research Methods—that happen to be taught elsewhere in the education school.

Low Admissions and Graduation Standards: For all intents and purposes, the majority of educational administration programs have open admissions policies, taking nearly everyone who applies. Educational administration students are judged by their faculty to have weak academic motivation and performance; many of those students are more interested in earning credits (and obtaining the salary increases that follow) than in

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pursuing rigorous academic studies and becoming administrators. Further, the standardized test scores of applicants for educational administration programs are among the lowest in education related fields and in all academe. For instance, elementary and secondary level teaching applicants to graduate school outscore them on all three sections of the Graduate Record Examination.

Weak Faculty: Graduate programs in educational administration depend too heavily on adjunct professors, who tend to be local superintendents and principals. Only a small proportion of those adjuncts have meaningful expertise in the academic content they are supposed to teach, and their dominant mode of instruction is the telling of war stories—personal anecdotes from their careers as school administrators. At the same time, programs employ too many full-time professors who have had little or no recent experience with the practice of school administration. Just six percent of all education school faculty have been principals, and only two percent have been superintendents. Further, in most programs even senior faculty are notable for their lack of scholarly productivity, and some of those faculty members supervise doctoral students in

educational administration even though they have neither the expertise nor the time and resources needed to do so effectively.

Inadequate Clinical Instruction:

Although many aspiring administrators say they want opportunities to connect their course work with practical experience in the schools, meaningful clinical instruction is rare in school leadership programs. It tends to be squeezed in while students work full time, and assignments tend to be completed in the schools where students are employed already, regardless of whether the school or its presiding administrator is successful. Moreover, few leadership programs help set up mentoring relationships, and most full time professors are unable to serve as or effectively supervise mentors.

Inappropriate Degrees: There are too many degrees and certificates in educational administration, and they mean different things in different universities. For instance, the doctor of education degree (Ed.D.) is reserved by some institutions for practitioners, but others award it to academics and researchers as well. The Ph.D. tends to be thought of as a degree for scholars, but some institutions award it to practitioners. Some universities award only one of the

degrees, some offer both, and others offer an entirely different degree. Further, aspiring principals and superintendents are often set to work toward a doctorate that was intended for a very different purpose—to prepare people to become academic researchers and scholars—and which has no relevance to their jobs. Even at the best universities, faculty find themselves having to compromise on the quality of the dissertation or final research project.

Poor Research: Every few years or so, there comes a new study or policy report examining the quantity and quality of research in school leadership. Invariably, the scholarship is found to be weak. The most commonly cited problems: Educational administration scholarship is a-theoretical and immature; it neglects to ask important questions; it is overwhelmingly engaged in non-empirical research; and it is disconnected from practice. Currently, the research in educational administration cannot answer questions as basic as whether school leadership programs have any impact on student achievement in the schools that graduates of these programs lead.

Recommendations

While it is tempting to demand reforms solely of the education schools and their leadership pro-

grams, there can be no meaningful improvement in the preparation of educational administrators unless states, school districts, and parent universities change as well.

Improvement in the conditions of the nation’s school leadership programs will require joint action by education schools and their leadership programs, the universities that house them, school districts and states. Specifically, they must:

1. Eliminate the Incentives that Favor Low-Quality Programs

School systems, municipalities, and states must find alternatives to salary scales that grant raises merely for accumulating credits and degrees. The most desirable alternative would be to tie raises to attaining the specific skills and knowledge that administrators need to do their jobs. This would shift the focus from simply acquiring credits to learning and then demonstrating—on the job and through examinations—that an individual has the skills that are necessary for leading schools and promoting student achievement.

In the short term, school systems should stop rewarding educators for earning credits that aren’t relevant to their work. For example, teachers should receive salary increases for educational leadership classes if, and

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only if, they actually assume an administrative position. This would significantly reduce the number of teachers who enroll in leadership programs even though they have no intention of becoming administrators, and the remaining students would be likely to have greater motivation to excel in their studies.

States, school districts, and unions can help by changing their expectations for degrees. Rather than accepting the random assortment of courses that constitute master's study today, they can demand that candidates complete a rigorous preparatory degree that provides necessary skills, knowledge, and clinical supervision. Further, they can discourage the lightweight and irrelevant administrative doctorate by offering salary incentives instead for administrators who complete advanced certificate programs that are actually germane to the needs of schools and children.

Universities must champion high standards for education schools and their leadership programs by embracing financial practices that strengthen those programs. At present, many university administrators use educational leadership programs as cash cows—they rake in the revenues the programs generate and transfer them to other university programs. Not only does this

demonstrate their low regard for the field and its educational mission, but it gives tacit approval for those programs to remain marginal in status and poor in quality.

In truth, many universities will need to make transfer payments in the opposite direction—while simultaneously raising accountability standards, so as to ensure quality—if they are to adequately fund their education schools and leadership programs.

2. Set and Enforce Minimum Standards of Quality

Weak programs should be strengthened or closed. Most of the programs visited in the course of this research were of poor quality. Some can be improved substantially; many cannot and should be closed. It is the responsibility of leadership programs and education schools, their home universities, and the states to ensure that all leadership programs achieve minimum acceptable standards on nine criteria that are laid out in the report. If leadership programs and education schools fail to act, then universities must step in. If universities do not carry out this assignment, then the states have the responsibility to do so.

Universities, under the leadership of their presidents and, if

necessary, their boards of trustees, have the responsibility for initiating reviews of the leadership programs on their campuses and acting on the results. Ultimately, though, the states have the power to bring about needed changes themselves by requiring the reauthorization of all of the educational leadership programs within their borders.

3. Redesign Educational Leadership Programs

The current grab bag of courses that constitutes preparation for a career in educational leadership must give way to a relevant and challenging curriculum designed to prepare effective school leaders. A new degree, the Master's in Educational Administration, should be developed. The program for aspirants to school leadership positions should be the educational equivalent of an M.B.A., the traditional two-year master's of business administration degree. It might be called an M.E.A., master's of educational administration, consisting of both basic courses in management (e.g. finance, human resources, organizational leadership and change, educational technology, leading in turbulent times, entrepreneurship, and negotiation) and education (e.g. school leadership, child development, instructional

design, assessment, faculty development, school law and policy, school budgeting, and politics and governance). The faculty would consist of academics and practitioners of high quality; the curriculum would blend the practical and theoretical, clinical experiences with classroom instruction; and teaching would make extensive use of active learning pedagogies such as mentoring, case studies, and simulations. The M.E.A., rigorously combining the necessary education subject matter and business/leadership education, should become the terminal degree needed by an administrator to rise through the ranks.

Subsequent professional development would come in the form of short-term programs geared to an administrator's career stage, the needs of his or her school or school system, and developments in the field. These programs would be targeted at highly specific issues/needs and would award certificates rather than degrees. For instance, rather than enrolling in a traditional doctoral program, a school administrator hoping to move from principal to superintendent might sign up for a nine-month program combining classroom instruction and an apprenticeship, followed by mentoring once on the job.

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Credentials have come to overshadow competence.

The doctor of education degree (Ed.D.) in school leadership should be eliminated. Today, it is a watered-down doctorate that diminishes the field of educational administration and provides a back door for weak education schools to gain doctoral granting authority. An Ed.D. is unnecessary for any job in school administration and creates a meaningless and burdensome obstacle to people who want to enter senior levels of school leadership. It encourages school districts to expect superintendent candidates to have doctorates and affluent public schools to hire principals with “Dr.” in front of their names. Neither position requires the skills and knowledge associated with doctoral study; what is desired is the status of the degree. Credentials have come to overshadow competence.

The doctor of philosophy degree (Ph.D.) in school leadership should be reserved for preparing researchers. The current ambiguity in the meaning of the Ph.D, which is being awarded both to practitioners and scholars, should be eliminated by redefining this doctorate as a rigorous research degree reserved exclusively for the very small number of students planning on careers as scholars of school leadership.

The number of students seeking doctorates in educational administra-

tion would then plummet, and the number of educational administration programs offering the doctorate could be and should be substantially reduced. By and large, only schools of education at the nation’s most research-oriented universities have the faculty resources needed to offer an adequate doctorate. Only these schools should grant Ph.D.s in educational administration.

The Education Schools Project promotes well-informed and non-partisan policy debate on how best to prepare the teachers, administrators, and researchers who serve the nation’s school children. The Project’s reports are drawn from surveys and studies it conducted on characteristics and performance of the more than 1,200 departments and schools of education at colleges and universities across the country. The Project plans to release reports on teacher education in fall 2005 and education research next year.

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Copies of the report, *Educating School Leaders*, are available at the Education Schools Project’s Web site, www.edschools.org.