Redesign and Development of the Superintendent Licensure Preparation Program for the 21st Century

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Abstract

The Ashland University's superintendent licensure program had not been revised and updated for the last several years. With all of the educational reforms in the first part of this new millennium, there was a pressing need to redefine and develop the overall program and courses embedded in it. An action plan was set up to carry out several steps to redesign and develop the program format, course syllabi, assessments, course delivery modes, and overall course schedule. Through the collection and analyses stakeholders' feedback, review of comparative universities' preparation programs, alignment of state and national leadership standards with course content, and the investigation of current research of program development, the redesign of the superintendent licensure program and courses emerged. The new program unveiled a series of course and standards-based content that will provide a relevant, updated school leader preparation program for tomorrow's superintendents. The program design process investigated students and faculty members' input related to the superintendent licensure program and courses' purposes and direction. The objectives of the process were to seek and secure the most important knowledge and skills sets that 21st century school superintendents need to possess in the program's courses and content in order to align with the state and national leadership standards, and to fully prepare these educators to assume a superintendent's position.

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Superintendents are facing a number of mandates and reforms that require their leadership and attention in the 21st century. Levine (2005), recognized that the role of administrators, both principals and superintendents, had changed earlier in the start of this new century. Levine stressed that school leaders are charged with complex responsibilities and functions that can include the development of a school vision and culture, support of teachers' effectiveness, management of crises, communication with the greater community, and more. However, recent research and studies of school administrators indicated that leadership preparation programs do not adequately prepare students to cope with educational issues and situations.

The limited research on university-based preparation programs suggested that key features that make such programs successful are lacking. These program features included an emphasis on leadership skills with a demonstrated relationship to student and school success, comprehensive clinical experiences that are linked to coursework, high quality supervision of clinical experiences, and selective admission into the program (Davis, 2016; Hess & Kelly, 2007).

With the importance of superintendents and the complexity of their jobs, school districts' board members, legislative members, and the community stakeholders are making increasing demands for highly competent leaders. Grissom and Loeb (2011); Harvey and Holland (2013) research showed that in the first part of this millennium that public and private school districts in the United States face a crisis in school leadership. The crisis was characterized by several challenges: high turnover, difficulties in finding replacements for departing school leaders, and a perception that newly hired leaders lacked the knowledge and skills to succeed in their positions (Gates, Ringel, & Santibanez, 2013). In addition, traditional university-based school leader preparation programs, the largest producer of new leaders in the nation, were found to be inadequate in preparing graduates for the challenges of school leaders (Briggs, Cheney, Davis, & Moll 2013; Manna, 2015).

Leithwood et al. (2004) studies showed that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors that contribute to student achievement. Therefore, it is imperative, especially in this era of increased focus on successful learning for all students, that universities' preparation programs assure that leaders for schools and districts are well-prepared and supported.

The Rand Education Report (2018) stated that school leader preparation program redesign required individuals from distinctly different organizations with a varying skill sets, time commitments, and management philosophies to determine the best ways to work together toward a common goal. The study also recommended that the design team establish regular communications methods and procedures, delegate responsibilities and workloads, and build a positive culture of trust and continuous improvement in the process.

The program redesign process began with the recognition of the need for change by stakeholders, including faculty members, students, practicing superintendents, and university administration in the superintendent's licensure program. From this recognition, an action plan was initiated to conduct focus groups and surveys with stakeholders in order to gather and analyze data and feedback about the type of program and courses relevant for 21st century superintendents. After the analysis of this information, new course syllabi which are considered the "framework of the program" were broken down and rebuilt according to new 21st century

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content areas and standards. Therefore, the program and courses were developed and included new content areas, such as the superintendent's leadership with school safety, opioids education, instructional best practices, and technology leadership.

The program's goals in the redesign process will center on delving into the key strengths, weaknesses, and content gaps contained in the courses, and then working to make recommendations to improvement the program for students. Throughout the program redesign process, literature and studies have shown the changing role of the superintendent who must lead with new skills in a time when the landscape of communities is shifting, thus necessitating the mobilization of people through advocacy, in conjunction with new partnerships with business, local government agencies, and community organizations (Lanore & Zepeda 2018).

Literature Review

Over the last two decades of the new century, much has been written concerning the complex roles of superintendents. Many authors have expressed that the first part of the 21st century has been a time of accelerated expectations, change, and reform. Meador, Derrick, Chicajo (2019) sum up the role of the superintendent as increasingly broad and ever-changing with the superintendent being responsible for the successes of the district and most assuredly responsible for the failures.

The role of the contemporary superintendent is often compared to an orchestra conductor. A district leader ultimately oversees all the educational, facilities, financial, personnel, and other administrative operations, along with working with several different stakeholders' groups to accomplish the vision and goals of the district (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Domenech, 2009). Furthermore, the research has shown the positive correlation between the quality of district leadership and the achievement of school district's goals and successes (Plotts & Gutmore, 2014;). Through Portis and Garcia (2007) studies, they had indicated that superintendents must know and demonstrate a strong grasp of the instructional and learning processes, work with the stakeholders to develop district goals, seek and apply resources in the form of technology, personnel, and materials, lead continuous improvement efforts, and provide assessments to measure accountability of the district's progress. To lead districts, superintendents must ask new questions about current school studies while navigating the changes in the local, state, and federal educational policies to ensure practices are aligned to meet the needs of children (Lanore & Zepeda 2018). All of these factors show the changing roles, functions, and responsibilities of the 21st century superintendent, and therefore require this district leader to possess relevant and up-to-date competencies to lead the district and community stakeholders in the achievement of the organizational vision and goals.

The Wallace Foundation (2012) funded a four-year research project to redesign university preparation programs. The university leaders associated with the project used several strategies to drive the redesign work: (1) building relationships within the redesign team in order to generate openness, trust, and collaboration which are essential for successful change to happen, (2) using the backward-mapping approach of establishing a common vision and goals (defining effective school leaders which will have a positive impact on student achievement and district success), and then working backward from this vision/goals to develop strategies and steps to redesign the courses and program, (3) employing the strategy of "going slow to go fast" which is approaching tasks within the redesign process with deliberation and intentionality rather than rushing to complete the tasks, along with the avoidance of mistakes and oversights, and (4) applying a logic model in guiding the redesign process which acts as a road map.

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The leaders of the Wallace Foundation (2012) project found this logic model to drive the planning, data collection, team communications, and monitoring steps in the redesign process. Studies have shown that a majority of superintendents surveyed on university preparation programs in 2016 indicated that program improvements were necessary (Davis, 2016). Davis (2016) research said that district leaders rated the level of preparation as "less than effective" on the competencies needed school leaders. Briggs, Cheney, Davis, & Moll (2013) and Manna (2015) rationale was that superintendents, principals, and preparation program representatives perceived university preparation programs as underperforming in their training of future school leaders. In a 2005 study by Levine, a majority of school leaders who were surveyed indicated that their programs did not prepare graduates to cope with administrative realities. Davis' study (2016) further defined the content areas that were lacking in existing preparation programs as being labor relations and teacher supervision, interpersonal skills and group dynamics, special education, crisis management, school finance, community relations, change process, and relationships with the board of education members. In addition, several members of the study recommended that the requirements for clinical and field experiences be increased.

In response to these studies, the Wallace Foundation initiated the compilation of four reports from various professional educators' groups that highlighted the shortcomings in university preparation programs referring to the first report from the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) survey of its 97 members and indicating that 59 members being interested in program redesign initiatives, while the second report from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education received 255 survey responses from its 842 member universities which represent more conventional preparation programs and stated that existing programs did not prepare graduates fully for their future leadership positions. The third report completed by the American Institutes for Research reviewed the laws and regulations of the different states pertaining to preparation programs. The final report by the American Association of School Administrators was based upon more than 400 superintendents across 42 states and reported shortcomings in preparation programs.

Research of the more successful superintendent preparation programs can serve as a basis and guide for the curriculum and organizational redesign of these preparation programs. Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr (2010) wrote about the exemplary programs and their program components which had been previously established as "best practices" in the research literature for the preparation of school leaders. These program components were: (1) purposeful targeted recruitment of teachers; (2) coherent curriculum focused on instructional leadership, organizational growth and development including change management, and strong support and alignment with state and national leadership standards; (3) active problem-based learning; (4) use of cohort formats; (5) strong collaboration/relationships between school districts and university preparation programs; and (6) well-designed and supervised internships. The Strive Partnership organization, subsidary of Knowledgeworks, studied what constitutes a successful program approach to the superintendency. Their research identified competencies that were critical for superintendents. They were: (1) collaborative leadership to work with institutions, organizations, and families, (2) communication skills, (3) inclusive decision making, (4) identify and address the school district's challenges, (5) constructive relations with the board of education, and (6) personalized learning and readiness to adopt innovation. Also, The AASA National Superintendent Certification Program has achieved success with a program that focuses upon the successful skills needed for superintendents to thrive on the job. The AASA program has a curricular program which concentrates on key issues, such as transformational leadership,

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understanding and developing board-superintendent relations, ensuring equity, navigating community, state, and national politics, budgeting and economic pressures, instructional leadership, effective communications, and serving effectively as CEO in the district and community (AASA, 2019).

Methodology

There were a number of participants in this work to redesign the superintendent licensure program. The participants were past graduate level students who had taken the courses as part of their completion of the licensure program, practicing superintendents who were willing to review and provide input concerning the program, and full-time and adjunct faculty members teaching the courses.

Data and other feedback information collected and analyzed in this program study came from a survey and focus groups. The survey was administered to the graduate students after their completion of the program. These graduate level students were practicing K-12th grade administrators from public, private, and chartered school districts who were striving to be superintendents in the near future. The survey consisted of two basic sections. The first section contained "forced response" questions in which students were asked to select from a list of responses. The forced response items were set up in a Likert scale format ranging from "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", to "Strongly Disagree". The students selected the response that they felt best reflected their belief. A breakdown of the content in these survey questions consisted of instructional delivery format and approach, credit hours setup, activities and assignments as the most valuable learning experiences, key topical areas in the courses, preferred numbers of face-to-face classes in hybrid courses, reasons for enrollment in the superintendent's program, and courses which were the most important for preparation for being a superintendent. The second section consisted of open-ended questions pertaining to the students' suggestions for enhancing the course and instruction. The survey participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses through the Blackboard Online system used by the university. Survey results were submitted through the university's data collection system with results eventually being distributed to the program design representatives. Sixteen students participated in this survey. The surveys were administered electronically over a two-month period through an online format.

The other form of data collection was through a series of focus groups. These group participants were practicing superintendents and full-time faculty members, and adjunct instructors. Participants for the focus groups were selected through two approaches. The approaches were to select (1) individuals who had taught courses in the program and were familiar with the courses' format and content, and (2) those participants who had no first-hand knowledge of courses' content but knew what superintendents should understand and practice. There were four face-to-face sessions which contained both practicing superintendents and faculty members. This mixture of superintendents and faculty members in the focus meetings helped to generate productive discussions which produced a combination of redesigned current course concepts and fresh, new ideas for the courses and program. The meetings' strategies centered around the examination of the superintendent licensure courses and program and then provided constructive input. With these focus groups, the overarching questions, which guided the review of the program were: (1) what were the key strengths of the courses and program?, (2) what were the major areas of weakness and content gaps of the courses and program?, and (3) what recommendations would be made to prepare students to be 21st century leaders? At each

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meeting, a recorder was designated and took notes on all comments, general information, and ideas for future analysis. Follow up meetings by faculty members were held to organize the data for purposes of analysis.

Feedback data from the student surveys and focus groups were analyzed by breaking it down according to: (1) relevant content areas in the course in the courses for superintendent preparation, (2) number of credit hours connected with each course and the overall program, (3) alignment of course content with state (Ohio Standards for Superintendents) and national (Educational Leaders Consortium Council) standards, (4) flexibility and nimbleness in courses in order to offer new and emerging content, and (5) increased emphasis on certain field and clinical experiences. The steps in the analyses involved weighing the feedback according to the five key components above, followed by inserting the feedback points into the new course syllabi and program structure, and then rewriting syllabi and course order, credit hours setup, and overall program description.

Throughout the data collection/analysis and course redesign work, the college dean and department chair were updated regarding the action steps and stakeholders involved in the overall process.

After construction of the redesigned courses and program from this data collection and analyses, the redesign team wrote up program and course proposals for department, college, and university approvals. Support from the department chair steered these proposals to the college's curriculum committee, followed by the university's curriculum committee, and then to the faculty senate. Each one of these committees reviewed and had to approve the new and revised course proposals and the program proposal. The main foci at these committee meetings were the prerequisites needed for entrance into the program, enrollment caps, frequency of course offerings, number of sections offered at the main campus and regional centers, which standards were being embedded within the courses, and the reasons for the program and courses being revised.

Results

The purpose of the survey and focus groups was to retrieve the stakeholders' input and data in order to develop and redesign the next generation of 21st century superintendent program and courses for today and tomorrow's students. Some questions asked in the survey and focus groups pertained to the areas of strengths, others wanted areas of weakness and program gaps, and others asked for recommendations and comments to enhance the courses and overall program.

To understand the distribution of student selection responses to the survey items, data from the survey's questions was analyzed for the significance in presenting information and recommendations. In the survey question written "which content areas in the superintendent licensure courses were the most important", Table 1 showed the students' perceptions through their responses.

Table 1
Students' Responses Regarding Content Areas That Are the Most Important
N= 16

Survey Item	*n* (%)
School Finance and Budgets	14 (88)
Governmental/Legal Issues and Regulations	13 (81)

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Collective Bargaining Agreement and Negotiations	13 (81)
School Levies and Campaigns	12 (75)
Strategic Planning	11 (69)
Superintendent/Board of Ed Relationships	10 (63)
School-Community Relationships	9 (56)
School Board Policies	8 (50)

Table 1 revealed those content areas in the superintendent licensure program that students perceived as the most important topics for present and future superintendent's candidates. The program design team took these responses in high consideration when reviewing and developing the new courses and overall program. Courses that emphasized these content areas were given high priority when redesigning the courses' syllabi, student learning outcomes, credit hours, assessments, and standards-based knowledge and skills sets.

Another survey question focused upon which specific courses in the current program are key in the preparation for being a superintendent. Table 2 highlighted those important courses.

Table 2
Students' Responses in Ranking the Key Courses in the Program
N= 16

Course	Rank
School Finance	1
Superintendent Seminar/Internship	2
The Superintendency	3
Admin of Personnel Services	4
Buildings, Grounds, & Facilities	4

Students reinforced the importance of school finance with their perceptions in Table 2, as they did in Table 1. The School Finance course ranked first among the students surveyed as the most significant course in the program. The redesign team definitely took the responses of these two questions into consideration when developing the new courses and program.

Another survey question asked about the amount of credit hours for the courses in the program through the question in Table 3. By asking this question, we were attempting to find out the students' perceptions regarding the significance of certain courses. For example, a three-hour credit course holds more importance from a content work effort, and substance standpoint generally than a one or two-hour credit course.

Table 3
Students' Preferred Format of Credit Hours for Courses
N= 16

Course Setup in Credit Hours	*n* (%)
Three Hour Courses	11 (69)
Two Hour Courses	5 (31)
One Hour Course	0 (0)

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Conclusions

The findings of this study support the development of a relevant and contemporary superintendent preparation program. Given the prevalence of rapid and major changes in all aspects of school district leadership during the first part of this new century, it is necessary for university leaders and faculty to review their preparation programs and courses in order to provide the most up-to-date and relevant curriculum and instruction for students preparing to be superintendents.

There are several conclusions as a result of this study's findings. First, preparation programs cannot be "ocean liners which are unable to turn around in today's sea of changes and issues they require leadership". Programs must be ready to adapt to the 21st Century issues and situations by offering curriculum and instruction that can address present and future leadership roles and responsibilities with flexibility. Second, the importance of internship field experiences and activities for students under a practicing superintendent are critical learning opportunities. A program that provides a strong field experiences component will help students to better understand and relate to a superintendent's role and tasks. Finally, the need to incorporate a concentrated curricular offering in the school finance area within the superintendent's preparation program is significant and highly warranted. This study showed the perceptions of students to better understand and comprehend this subject area.

As stated in the article, students who desire to be 21st Century superintendents must possess the key knowledge and skill sets to be an effective school district leader. As university administrators and faculty members, we must commit to providing the most up-to-date and relevant superintendent preparation programs and courses because a school administrator is the second most important factor (right behind a classroom teacher) that impacts student learning and performance.

Levine (2005) exposed the lack of studies of school administrators and their preparatory programs which somewhat failed to equip students to manage and lead in today's schools. The article begins the focus on this area of study by the investigation of the redesign and development process of the superintendent preparation program at a university in the Midwest. However, further studies are needed in order to assess the steps in the program assessment and redesign processes and, also, discover the best curricular and instructional components needed in today's preparation programs and courses.

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