

RECONCEPTUALIZING SCHOOL LEADER LEARNING: BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND UNIVERSITY-BASED PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Currently, considerable difference exists between learning experiences for school administrators at the pre-service and in-service stages in their careers. Individuals aspiring to formal school leadership roles participate in learning experiences that are part of university-based administrator preparation programs. Those already serving in leadership roles engage in ongoing learning experiences normally referred to as staff development activities. In what follows, we provide a comparison between these two very different types of learning experiences, suggest the value of “blurring the lines” between these traditional approaches, share a unified model of simultaneous learning for both pre- and in-service school leaders, and highlight the strengths and benefits of this model based on our first cohort of experience with it.

A Comparison of School Leader Staff Development and University-Based Preparation Programs

Our analysis of the differences between these two types of learning experiences for school leaders focuses on several key components. These include the venue (where learning occurs), who serves to facilitate learning, the career stage of the learner, and the focus of learning that occurs. This analysis also includes what are suggested as limitations of past practices and recommendations for improving practices in this area.

Most current school leader learning activities could be classified or labeled as either university-based administrator preparation or staff development (see Table 1).

Table 1

Differences Between University-Based Programs and Staff Development

Traditional label	University-based programs	Staff development
Venue for learning	Higher education institution	School, district, regional staff development center
Facilitator of learning	University faculty members	Administrative practitioners, colleagues
Career stage of learner	Pre-service (aspiring administrator)	In-service (administrative practitioner)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Traditional label	University-based programs	Staff development
Focus of learning	Administrative theory and school management	Practical application of theory and instructional leadership

State certification requirements drive pre-service learning activities for those seeking formal leadership positions. Typically, those aspiring to formal school leadership roles pursue graduate level study at a higher education institution resulting in both an advanced degree in the field of school administration and state certification. Other individuals who have already completed an advanced degree progress through a set of courses that meets state certification requirements for initial licensure as a school principal.

Once these individuals reach the in-service career stage as practicing school leaders they engage in learning activities that are normally thought of as staff development. While some continue engagement in university-based learning experiences that are often mandated by state certification requirements, most pursue other learning activities geared toward acquiring or enhancing practical skills and competencies designed to improve instructional leadership practices. Often, these learning activities occur at the learner's work site and are facilitated by administrative practitioner colleagues.

Major distinctions between these two traditional types of learning are related to the focus of learning. University-based administrator preparation is often heavily theory-based with a strong emphasis on school management. According to Young, Petersen, and Short (2001), stakeholders often believe that what is taught in university preparation programs is not connected to what leaders actually need to do in their schools. Peel, Wallace, Buckner, Wren, and Evans (2001) indicated that universities have traditionally focused on introducing potential administrators to the latest trends and theories in educational leadership while providing few practical skills for applying that knowledge to the real world. Typically, staff development activities are geared toward the acquisition of practical competencies related to learners' leadership practice. More often than not, competencies and skills related to school improvement initiatives have become the focus of such learning rather than building management issues. Hirsh (2004) concluded that educators perceive staff development to be effective if it is seen as part of the school improvement process.

While staff developers and university faculty members may be satisfied with the current learning structures that exist, there is considerable rationale for considering a new model of learning for school leaders. Tirozzi (2001) indicated there is a shortage of qualified candidates for principal positions. Concerns related to traditional, university-based preparation programs have included a heavy reliance on theory with little

connection to practical application that could lead to improved student learning (Murphy, 1992). The requirements and looming sanctions of the No Child Left Behind Act cause this to be an ideal time to re-conceptualize learning for both pre-service and in-service school leaders.

A New Model for Learning

Table 2 reflects a more unified model for school leader learning that combines features of traditional staff development activities and university-based preparation programs. Learning activities in this model would occur at school and district sites, be facilitated by both administrative practitioners and university faculty members, be geared toward both in-service and pre-service school leaders, and focus on practical skills and competencies with an emphasis on school improvement.

Table 2

Combined Characteristics of a Unified Model of School Leader Learning

Traditional label	Combined characteristics
Venue for learning	School and district sites
Facilitator of learning	Administrative practitioners and university faculty members
Career stage of learner	Pre-service and in-service (aspiring practitioners and administrative practitioners)
Focus of learning	Practical application of administrative theory organized within professional standards with an emphasis on competencies related to school improvement

Common criticisms of university-based preparation programs include a weak knowledge base, fragmented programs, and lack of attention to practice (Murphy, 1992). The unified model outlined here includes learning activities that focus on professional standards, such as the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium standards, which are commonly accepted and used for program approval and accreditation, combined with an emphasis on competencies related to school improvement.

The use of both administrative practitioners and university faculty members provides a greater level of current practical knowledge, skills, and competencies that lend themselves to more authentic learning activities. By including both in-service and pre-service school leaders in learning activities, a system of peer support and mentoring is easily incorporated into learning activities including in-depth and ongoing field-based experiences. Having such systems in place provides the necessary support for all learners as they attempt to implement new learning into their leadership practice. The program described in the next section pro-

vides an example of how this unified model of school leader learning could look in practice.

The Collaborative Principal Preparation Program

School administration faculty members from a regional state university met with superintendents from six suburban districts in a Midwestern metropolitan area in the fall of 2001 to develop the Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP). In developing the CPPP, consideration was given to the areas of concern regarding traditional principal preparation programs and the growing need for high quality leadership candidates to fill projected vacancies in administrative positions. The vision for the program was a collaborative approach between university faculty members and area administrative practitioners in creating a program that would assist school districts with respect to future needs for quality school leaders while assisting students in the program in completing a master's degree and initial principal certification requirements.

A major shortcoming of university-based administrator preparation programs relates to the quality of candidates seeking entry to programs and relaxed admission standards (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). Rather than relying on student self-selection, as is the practice in many traditional principal preparation programs, districts participating in the program identified potential administrative candidates who were perceived to have the potential to become strong instructional leaders. No specific selection criteria were established for the initial cohort of students; each participating district identified candidates using their own selection criteria. From the six participating districts, 27 candidates were identified and recommended for the program by district administrators with 17 students entering the program in the initial cohort.

An emphasis on collaboration has been a hallmark of the program. To coordinate the partnership, a leadership team was established at the beginning of the program. The leadership team consisted of a representative from each of the school districts and the regional professional development center and faculty members from the participating university. This instructional team met three times each year to coordinate activities, review progress, evaluate results, and make modifications to improve the program.

Several components of the program were put in place specifically to address concerns related to traditional principal preparation programs. First, the university faculty group is comprised of former school administrators with extensive experience in public schools. Thus, a balanced approach between theory and practice was emphasized throughout the program. Secondly, the leadership team reviewed the syllabus of each of the courses to ensure that the material was relevant to the students and the demands of school leadership positions. Next, opportunities were provided for practicing administrators to teach topics in courses in which they had expertise. Finally, instructional team members from participating districts were asked to select strong instructional leaders from their respective dis-

tricts to serve as mentors to students throughout the two-year program. Throughout their program, students were required to complete activities and assignments geared toward gaining their mentor's perspectives on the content being learned. This gave students and mentors opportunities for relevant conversations and reflection relative to administrative practice.

Students participating in the program took two classes each semester for six consecutive semesters as follows: Fall 2002, Foundations of Educational Administration, and Elementary or Secondary Administration; Spring 2003, School Law, and Public School Finance; Summer 2003, School Personnel Administration, and School Supervision; Fall 2003, Introduction to Research, and Internship in School Administration; Spring 2004, Ethical Systems and Learning Theory, and Internship in School Administration; and Summer 2004, Curriculum Development and Assessment, and Administration of the Middle Grades.

For the sake of convenience, classes were held one night a week and all of the course work was conducted in school buildings of participating school districts. District administrators provided classrooms free of charge for this program. Thus, in a two-year period of time students earned a Masters of Science in Education degree in either Elementary or Secondary Administration.

Many new administrators are expected to assume their responsibilities without any type of structured support system or continuous improvement plan in place. CPPP is attempting to address this concern. The state department of elementary and secondary education awarded a \$20,000 State Action for Educational Leadership Preparation (SAELP) grant to the CPPP in September 2002. Funds from this grant provided by the Wallace Foundation were used to enhance the professional development of the students participating in this program and their mentors. The grant provided resources that were used to contract with consultants who had expertise in the content areas identified. In addition, funds were allocated to cover the expenses related to substitute teachers for the CPPP participants to attend training focused on various aspects of instructional leadership and school improvement. Substitutes were also provided for students to work with mentors on various days throughout the program.

There are several strengths to this approach for the students, their mentors, other administrators in the participating districts, and potential employers. First, the students were engaged in professional development activities in areas related to school improvement. This complemented and extended learning that occurred in their coursework. These activities were structured to ensure that students attended the training with their mentors. Students then spent a minimum of one day working with their mentors in the school setting on the strategies learned. Thus, the students not only gained from the initial learning experience but also from the follow-up experience with their mentors.

The mentors benefited through their participation in additional professional development activities in various areas related to school improvement. These activities provided an opportunity for the mentors to learn from recognized authorities in order to enhance their skills. In addi-

tion, the follow-up sessions with the students allowed the mentors to understand the perspective of an aspiring administrator, an additional growth opportunity. Thus, the two-year mentoring program was designed to be a professional growth opportunity for not only the student, but the mentor as well. The professional development activities were coordinated with the following courses: Elementary or Secondary Administration, School Personnel Administration, and School Supervision. Training related to school improvement was a natural extension of the content taught in these courses.

These training opportunities were also made available to any administrators in the CPPP districts who were interested in attending. This provided a way to support the professional growth of additional administrators in the critical area of school improvement. Only a few additional administrators attended these sessions in the initial year. However, as opportunities continue to be provided these numbers are increasing. Having administrators participate in this training with students allows them to work together and learn from each other. It also emphasizes the importance of continuous learning.

The areas of professional development that were selected for the initial CPPP cohort included walk-through supervision, data analysis, and performance-based teacher evaluation. These topics were identified by the instructional leadership team to be of high interest for the participating school districts. The initial set of activities for the 2002–03 school year focused on the concept of walk-through supervision. A walk-through is an organized observation in which the principal visits classrooms to look specifically at instructional practices and student learning (Fink & Resnick, 2001). The walk-throughs usually last from five to ten minutes per classroom. Program participants and their mentors attended an initial all-day session in the fall and a follow-up session in February then designated a day in which they observed together the classroom instruction of several staff members. They then compared notes regarding effective practices observed in each of the classrooms. Following this process the students wrote a paper outlining their experience and what they had learned as part of their school supervision class.

This approach not only strengthened the participants' knowledge base but also allowed mentors the opportunity to gain another perspective on the observation. An added benefit was the relationship that students and mentors developed as a result of this two-year process. Several of the districts have adopted the walk-through supervision process with their staffs as a result of this experience. An additional outcome of this program may be for districts to require first- and second-year administrators to attend these professional development activities as part of their professional growth plan.

This new model has provided university faculty members with the opportunity to participate in professional development activities that allow them to stay current in the areas of instructional leadership and school improvement. Data analysis, effective supervision practices, performance-based teacher evaluation, and other topics related to instruction-

al leadership are key content areas for the preparation of school leaders. The systematic and ongoing contact between school district leaders and university faculty members has strengthened existing relationships and enabled faculty members to establish a more consistent perspective of what students need to know and do to become effective instructional leaders.

Discussion

Practicing school leaders are faced with many competing demands and it is easy to get caught up in the myriad details of school management, leaving little or no time to focus on instructional leadership and improving student learning. Participating in this new model of learning provides opportunities for a renewed emphasis on learning in this area. Engaging both novice and experienced school leaders in learning opportunities such as those outlined in this model holds promise in terms of increasing organizational capacity by ensuring that all schools have in place a highly qualified school leader and a system for renewing this critical and rapidly diminishing human resource.

Students in this program have the unique opportunity to be involved in a program in which they learn from experienced school leaders, including assigned mentors, national consultants, other school district leaders from participating districts and university faculty members who share their expertise with the students throughout the program. This model of learning should give the aspiring school leaders who participate in the program a strong knowledge base in instructional leadership and provide skills that will allow them to “hit the ground running” when hired in an administrative position. Such a model for school leader learning has implications for those responsible for planning and implementing professional development for school leaders and university-based administrator preparation programs.

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