Simple But Incorrect Solutions to Complex Problems

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Abstract: The shortage of principals in California is examined in this article. While the data show that there is not a shortage of individuals having the necessary credential to hold the position, often there are not enough applicants for principal positions. Reconceptualizing and restructuring of principal positions are emphasized as potentially correct solutions.

Part I: The Problem

For years educators have heard about the impending and potentially devastating shortage of school administrators (Argetsinger, 2000; NAESP, 2000; Orozco, 2001). For example, Los Angeles Unified School District, the 2nd largest district in the United States with a student population of more than 711,000 students, began the 2000-2001 school year with 40 unfilled principal positions. Similar events were happening in other parts of the country. The potential of this problem escalates as baby-boomers reach retirement age, and many retire (Adams, 1999; Argetsinger, 2000: NAESP, 2000). Principals are also leaving their jobs

at younger ages because of changes in retirement eligibility, the high stress and time demands of the job, lack of support from multiple sources, and salaries that are too low given the job expectations and requirements (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003).

The notion of a principal shortage in California was explored in the spring of 2000 in a state-wide survey of superintendents and/or human resource directors conducted cooperatively by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and the California Association of Professors of Educational Administration (CAPEA) (Kerrins, Cushing, & Johnstone, 2001). The survey was designed to investigate the issues of anticipated principal vacancies, hiring practices, and new administrator competencies. Almost half the districts responding to the survey reported difficulty in finding the candidate they wanted to hire. Many of the respondents reported the number of applicants for principal positions was shrinking, and expressed concern about the difficulty of finding highly qualified, experienced principals to fill administrative vacancies. Superintendents of urban school districts, as well as those of districts located in rural areas, reported the greatest difficulty, for them the shortage was already real.

Yet, a careful review of the longitudinal data from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) indicated there was no shortage of credentialed prospective candidates for principal positions (see Table 1). For example, in 1999-2000, 3,442 new administrative credentials were issued in California, about 41% of the number of public school principal positions in the State. In the previous year, 2,571 new administrative credentials were issued; numbers were similar for the previous two years as well.

Reviewing these data leads one to the inevitable conclusion that there is no shortage of potential applicants for principal positions in California. A recent nation-wide study of principal vacancies offered a similar conclusion, "There are far more candidates certified to be principals than there are principal vacancies to fill" (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003, p. 7).

Yet, suggesting that conclusion to superintendents and human resource directors who receive few or no applicants for principal positions is counterproductive and often escalates their frustration (L. Aceves, October 19, 2002, personal communication). Both survey and testimonial data document administrator concerns about a lack of applicants for principal positions. In a recent interview, the personnel director of Chico Unified School District emphasized, "There is an administrative shortage. There have been 34 applications for the Chico High School job, but that position was advertised widely. For the

Table 1
Number of Administrative Credential Issued 1991-92 through 1999-00

Credentials Issued to Individuals who
are Likely Employed as Administrators

Years	Out of State Applic.	Intern Creden.	Prelim. Creden.	Certs. of Eligib.*	Total Initial Issued Creden.	Renew or Reissue
1991-92	136	133	1,780	0	2,049	1,369
1992-93	60	65	1,319	0	1,444	3,216
1993-94	49	86	1,367	19	1,521	3,726
1994-95	136	89	396	843	1,464	3,305
1995-96	279	116	459	905	1,759	2,791
1996-97	486	142	457	1,014	2,099	3,172
1997-98	750	215	675	1,297	2,937	3,629
1998-99	655	194	659	1,063	2,571	3,626
1999-00	1,271	283	724	1,164	3,442	4,648

* These individuals are typically not yet employed as administrators but are eligible for employment, having completed the Preliminary Administrative Credential requirements.

assistant principal positions at Chico High and Chico Junior High, there were only about 12 applications. In general, there are fewer applicants for secondary administrative positions than for positions at the elementary level" (J. Sands, March 26, 2003, personal communication).

Based on this review, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a shortage in the number of credentialed potential administrators who actually apply for administrative openings. If that is true, if credential prospective administrators are not applying for principal positions in the numbers they used to, what might be done to change this situation?

Part II: The *Passing a Test* Solution

In California, and in other states across the nation, one solution to the increasing problem of principal shortage has been to identify and approve alternative routes for principal credentialing. In 2002, the California General Assembly passed and the governor signed SB 1655, legislation intended to increase the effectiveness and pool of school principals and other education leaders. Senate Bill 1655 included a testing alternative, which provides the option for candidates to take a test adopted by the Commission that assesses skills, abilities, and knowledge needed for an administrative credential. This alternative

bypasses any requirement for coursework, reading or discussion of leadership knowledge and skills.

This testing alternative, endorsed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) but opposed by the California Association of Professors of Educational Administration (CAPEA) and eventually by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), was intended to provide flexibility in preparation options for prospective administrators. The test option was strongly championed by then Commission Chairman and Superintendent of Schools for San Diego Unified School District, Alan Bersin. On December 6, 2002, the CCTC announced that they had adopted the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) designed and administered by Education Testing Service (ETS), as the examination option for obtaining a California Preliminary Administrative Services Credential. Individuals who pass this assessment and meet the prerequisites (including passage of the California Basic Educational Skills Test [CBEST] and a minimum of three years of successful teaching or school services experience in public or private schools) will qualify for a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential or Certificate of Eligibility. While it would appear that *passing a test* might be a quicker and less costly route to an administrative credential, one must review the technical qualities of the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) to ascertain whether it will, in fact, ensure that qualified individuals are receiving credentials.

To establish content validity of the SLLA, ETS reviewed a number of important documents relevant to the preparation and job expectations of school administrators including the effective principals research (Research for Better Schools, 1987), job analyses (Nelson, 1982), and documents prepared by professional organizations such as the National Association for Secondary School Principals (1992) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration/Educational Leadership Constituent Council (1995). Content validity was established based on a review of these documents, the recommendation of an external expert panel, and alignment with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; Tannenbaum, 1999). However, a review of the knowledge areas assessed in the SLLA and those identified in the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL) revealed four CPSEL standards not assessed on the SLLA: school finance, school law, special education, and school personnel (L. Wildman, April 8, 2003, personal communication). Further, as noted by Wildman, the SLLA measures the dispositions associated with the ISLLC standards identified as important for effective school leadership (L. Wildman, December 11, 2002, personal communication).

What about the predictive validity of the SLLA? There is none (J. Holloway, October 18, 2002, personal communication). Thus, there is no way of knowing, or for that matter of even having a best guess, as to how those who pass the test will actually perform on-the-job as school principals. Holloway also pointed out that no data exist as to the predictive validity of principal preparation programs either. However, this statement is not quite true. The spring 2000 ACSA/CAPEA survey revealed that, when superintendents and/or human resources directors were asked to judge the competencies of principals hired over the previous three years, a high percentage of the new hires were judged as *always* or *frequently* demonstrating competency on CCTC program standards in leadership (81%), management of schools (78%), policy and political influences (77%), human resources (78%), and technology (83%) (Kerrins et al., 2001).

It is important to point out that as it is currently used in California, the SLLA is a single measure, at a single point in time. Good measurement practices require repeated measures across time to more accurately assess knowledge, skills, dispositions, and performance. One would argue that administrator preparation programs are better aligned with good measurement practices. In general, faculty meet and work with students over several courses and semesters and thus have many opportunities to gather evidence regarding a student's strengths and areas of need. As a result, preparation programs are able to provide instruction and support or, if needed, to counsel a student out of school administration and suggest an alternative career possibility. In fact, almost every California Association of Professors of Educational Administration colleague spoken with about this issue indicated he or she has discouraged at least a few students from completing the program and, instead, has suggested alternative career paths.

Also of interest in assessing the appropriateness of the *passing a test* solution for addressing the administrator shortage in California, is to look at how the SLLA is used in other states across the country. In an e-mail dated December 2, 2002, Richard Tannebaum, the primary ETS researcher of the test, wrote "In other states…it is my understanding that there are educational requirements that must be fulfilled as part of the licensure process, so while the SLLA may be the final requirement, it is not the sole requirement for licensure; graduation from an accredited educational administration/ leadership program, for example, may be another….Leadership programs should, in my personal opinion, continue to prepare future education leaders broadly…" (L. Wildman, December 11, 2002, personal communication).

In sum, it would seem that while passing the SLLA might be a

quicker and less costly way to obtain a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential in California, as a single measure of knowledge and skill it fails both to assess competencies identified as important in the State, and to demonstrate predictive validity. As researchers, we concur with its authors: the SLLA is probably best used in conjunction with administrator preparation programs rather than in place of them.

Part III: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Shortage Problem

Will passing a test, or any other alternative preparation program, adequately address the problem of principal shortages? As is evident from reviewing data from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, more than enough individuals hold (or are qualified to hold) an Administrative Services Credential to fill all principal vacancies for years to come in California. What then is the real problem that has led to a shortage of qualified applications for principal positions? And, once identified, what solution or solutions will likely help to solve this problem?

Part III of the spring 2000 ACSA/CAPEA survey of Superintendents and Human Resources Directors included four open-ended items that required short answer responses to questions about the low numbers of minority applicants and about strategies for (a) increasing the number of candidates from ethnically diverse backgrounds, (b) increasing the quantity of the applicant pool, and (c) increasing the quality of the applicant pool (Kerrins, Cushing, & Johnstone, 2001). Content analysis of responses to those questions was completed and, as reported below, indicates that solutions other than alternative preparation/credentialing options are needed to address the problem of the administrative shortage if districts hope to both attract and retain qualified prospective principals.

To borrow and modify a phrase from the 1992 presidential campaign (It's the economy, stupid!): "It's the job, stupid!" That is, data from the ACSA/CAPEA survey indicate it is the job rather than preparation programs that are keeping potential candidates from applying for administrative positions (Cushing et al., 2003). Superintendents and human resources directors were consistent in identifying job expectations, long hours, and low pay as issues of concern to prospective hires; these findings were verified both by candidates themselves and by professors of education administration.

Table 2 shows responses to the prompt, "Please share with us your thinking and insights about why more minority candidates aren't applying for principal positions." Although asked specifically about the pool of minority candidates, many responses included the words ALL, capitalized and underlined, implying the reasons minority candidates were not

applying were often the same reasons any candidate was not applying. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that, for the most part, these issues affect application rates regardless of race or ethnicity. Further analysis revealed two issues that appeared to differentially impact minority candidates. First the lack of role models, compounded by the lack of a supportive, nurturing work environment, is believed to result in fewer minority applicants for administrative positions. Second, superintendents and human resources directors identified a lack of mobility in minority candidates. As if fearing a non-supportive work environment, minorities often choose to stay near a supportive home environment rather than to accept positions which may be some distance away from family and friends.

Informal discussions were also held with teachers, administrators, and professors of educational administration about the administrative shortage and what they saw as attractive or problematic about the job of school principal. Their responses, heard over and over, were similar to those reported in Table 2. For example, Michelle Hunter, elementary principal in Glendora Unified School District, California, reported that accepting a principal position cost her money because of the additional hours of day-care she needed for her children. She remembers her first year as a *blur*, always more to do than any amount of evening and Saturday work time allowed.

Similarly, Guy Roubian, high school principal in Upland Unified School District (California), when talking about the amount of work required of high school principals, said he *disappeared* into his job so much so that his family became used to not seeing him (Cushing et al., 2003). Steve Jennings, personnel director of Paradise Unified School District (California), echoed the thinking of these principals, suggesting that fewer people are applying for administrative positions in part because it is not a financial gain from teaching; they work longer hours and "more days…and the job is getting more difficult."

Chico Unified School District (California) personnel director Jim Sands agreed that pay is a key issue. Students in educational administration preparation programs recognize the difficulties, too. Beverly Foster, director of the Professional Administrative Credential program at Point Loma Nazarene University (San Diego), reported that at least some Preliminary Administrative Services Credential students tell her they do not intend to seek principal positions because of the long hours and lack of respect from both community members and teachers. Instead, they plan to apply for central office positions in curriculum.

Table 2
Explanations of Why Minority Candidates
Are Not Applying for Principal Positions

Theme	Frequency	Instantiations
Poor working conditions: Low pay	70	· The pay differential of a principal and a teaching position is not great enough when equated to the responsibility level · In demand in other, better paying jobs · Teachers make more money in their jobs · The amount of work and pay don't match · Money made at the top of the teacher's salary schedule is more attractive than making a little more and putting in twice the number of hours
Poor working conditions: Stress	53	· Public criticism and job pressure · Principal's job not viewed positively as in past · The principal's job is becoming more thankless · The rewards of the position eclipsed by liabilities · Too much responsibility and accountability · Increasingly difficult because of reduced power of principals due to collective bargaining and increased union power and control · Dealing with so much discipline and no time for program · The challenges of the position as one looks at reform demands and who must answer first, site principal! · Standards and accountability focus on the principal who has no ability to control variables around student achievement
Poor working conditions: Long hours	26	· Longer work day and work year · Hard work, long hours · Tremendous time commitment · Long hours and stress, takes a toll on personal life
Not encouraged: Lack of role models and mentoring	19	· Not encouraged at early career stage · Lack of mentoring and encouragement by existing principals · Lack of minority role models and/or mentors to guide them into administration · Frequently there is not a *reaching out* attitude in recruiting and enrolling minority students in university programs with the emphasis on administrators

Part IV: Alternative Solutions

If educators and policy makers are truly interested in solving the present and impending shortage of administrative credential applicants for principal positions, the issues of job-role expectations and pay must be addressed. Superintendents and human resources directors who responded to the ACSA/CAPEA survey offered suggestions for how to deal with this issue. For one thing, they said the fiscal rewards for the job, including salary and benefits, must be increased to be more in-line with the job expectations and time and accountability requirements. Second, they suggested that as a society multiple ways to manage school sites be found and perhaps even reduce the on-the-job time requirements for principals. They offered these two possibilities: (a) develop more realistic job descriptions, or (2) increase the allocation of administrators and/or support staff (counselors and curriculum specialists) on sites to share in the work requirements (see Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2004, for a discussion of possible support strategies).

Neither solution proposed above seems particularly realistic or easy to implement, especially given the present economy and the current budget crisis in California. To further exacerbate the difficulty of implementing these kinds of solutions, the California Teachers' Association, a consistently strong voice in California, persistently argues that there are too many administrators and not enough teachers to meet the learning and accountability demands of policy and policy-makers. Yet, data from this study suggest that unless these critical job-related issues are addressed there will continue to be a shortage of applicants for principal positions, particularly in schools in rural or inner-city areas, regardless of how individuals obtain their initial credential.

Part V: Conclusion

It appears from the data reported here that providing alternative routes to the administrative credential may increase the number of people holding an administrative credential in California. However, if the job description and support systems do not change, the problem of too few applicants for principal vacancies is likely to persist. As it presently exists, the job of school principal is not very appealing to many qualified individuals. This problem is exacerbated by both geography and job expectations. The data reported in this manuscript argue for ongoing discussions and policy initiatives to help redefine the role and responsibilities of school principals, and to enhance the remuneration systems

available to them. If roles and responsibilities of school principals are addressed, geographical dispersion aspects of the problem may be more easily resolved.

The late, great journalist H. L Mencken once noted that, "For every complex question, there is a simple answer—and it's wrong." It seems clear that members of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the California General Assembly saw the need to address the concerns voiced by school superintendents and personnel directors about a lack of applicants for principal positions. But, failing to probe and understand the reasons for this shortage, they chose the simple, but wrong solution of changing the credential requirements rather than the more complex, but correct solution of re-conceptualizing and restructuring job descriptions, expectations, support systems, and salary schedules for school principals.

How best can this re-conceptualization and restructuring occur? Policy makers, faculty of administrative credential programs, local educational agency administrators, and professional organizations must begin a shared conversation to redefine the role and job expectations. For example, districts might consider the implementation of co-principals, or might establish positions such as learning director, teacher leader, or assessment coach to share leadership responsibility with principals in their areas of expertise. Districts might consider the use of leadership coaches who could offer another set of ears and eyes to help understand and prioritize the work of leadership within a school. Such positions would require additional study, both in terms of preparing for each role and in evaluating the effectiveness of these different support positions. This study would be a contribution (i.e., initial preparation and program evaluation) higher education faculty could make to re-conceptualize the work of principals and help to solve the perceived shortage/job definition problem.

Educators from both school districts and universities must continue to work together to educate the general public, and especially the elected policymakers, about the real explanation for the principal shortage and, of critical importance, to argue for increased finding for salaries for school administrators. These educators must be relentless. Pilot projects to experiment with and evaluate these new ideas should also be funded with the results widely disseminated.

Finally, while everyone must work together, it is especially important for policy makers to revisit the issue of principal shortages, and to consider these more sophisticated and complex solutions if they are truly committed to solving the problem of a shortage of applicants for school principal positions.

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