

Some Thoughts on Rethinking the Pre-Service Education of School Leaders

By Joseph Murphy

Over the last 20 years, it has been my privilege to engage in a variety of scholarly endeavors in the area of leadership education. I have also had the opportunity to help shape policy initiatives on this critical topic at both the national level and in a significant number of states. Finally, at the street level I have had the honor to manage a department of school administration dedicated to the preparation of quality school leaders, a statewide academy developed to assist administrators already on the job, and a number of review panels whose assignment it was to take stock of preparation programs in a variety of states. As a faculty member, I have also been provided with the time and other resources to make sense of these experiences in the context of the considerable body of work that is being amassed on the topic of leadership education for school administrators.

My most recent sweep through all of the above knowledge and analyses leads me to the following two major conclusions about initial preparation programs in the United States. On the upside, a good deal of energy and hard work is being poured into attempts to revitalize preparation programs. On the downside, we are not seeing much in the way of real improvement; that is, most of the change is on the margins. The logical question then is: How can we use the energy afoot to better affect; that is, gain more traction on the program improvement agenda? My conclusion is that unless we redefine the rules of the game for how we engage in preparation development work, we will be quite unlikely to make more sanguine judgments in the future. In fact, if we do not get off the road we have traveled for the last 40 years, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to reach a different destination. In particular, my assessment is that we would be advantaged if we rebuilt and recultured preparation programs, not on traditional scaffolding (e.g., debates about the knowledge base, designing programs for administrative roles, trying to discern what social science discipline will save us), but around a set of powerful design principles. Based on the types of work noted above, my colleagues Martha McCarthy, Hunter Moorman, and I have forged a framework of six such guiding principles that collectively meet the criterion of fostering the reculturing of preparation programs.

Foundation-based programs. One of the conclusions of our work in the field is that many departments are silent about what grounds their programs. Our sense is that if the considerable energy flowing into programs is to amount to much, institutions need to begin by addressing the mission or the foundation of the program—of answering the question, not

in a long document but in a phrase or a sentence (e.g., justice, standards, equitable learning), about what the program stands for. Absent this explicit destination-defining and goal-anchored work, it is, we have discovered, very difficult to build effective preparation programs.

Value-based admissions. Almost all programs in school leadership admit students using criteria that have questionable linkages to effective leadership (e.g., GPAs, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation) and very little connection to what they claim is important to them in terms of program foundations and values. Our sense is that improvement of initial preparation programs will depend on our willingness to move to mission or value-based recruitment and selection. If a program claims *instructional leadership* as its anchor, then it would behoove the faculty to craft a half dozen ways to look good on these measures. If *urbanicity* or *justice* provides the seedbed for the program, there are many more powerful ways to capture these ideas than by looking at test scores.

Zero-based curriculum development. Almost all programs enter the reform process by privileging the existing curriculum, or huge chunks thereof. This is, of course, extremely problematic when the curriculum does not match the foundation(s) of the program, which is the norm in our profession. Given the struggles experienced by peers in programs throughout the country, we are increasingly convinced that program rebuilding should feature a zero-based curriculum development strategy. That is, quite simply, we suggest the rebuilding process begin by pulling all the existing courses off the table and asking what offerings make sense given the foundation(s) that anchor the program. Existing courses can always be reintroduced in whole or part as appropriate, but it is very difficult to move them off the playing field after the game has begun.

Practice-anchored learning experiences. Our work over the last quarter century reinforces what scholarship on administration preparation has been telling us for some time now. The vicious attacks on the primacy of practice at the inception of the theory era in school leadership went too far and ended up introducing a cure for a difficulty that was as bad or worse than the original problem. We are increasingly convinced that the scaffolding for preparation programs needs to be forged from authentic issues of practice (e.g., reading meltdown in the middle grades, closing a high school). Knowledge needs to be introduced in the context of these problems and opportunities. In other words, situated learning needs to be highlighted. The *bridge* metaphor needs to be replaced by a new design that looks more like a strand of DNA where knowledge and practice are integrally connected.

Community-grounded culture. The culture, the norms, and the structures of our organizations do not support collaborative efforts inside departments nor between

colleagues in the academic and practice arms of the profession. Much like our counterparts in public schools in earlier times, professors remain mistresses and masters of their own work cubicles and their own work. Historically, we have neither desired nor required much collaboration or integration. Individualism, autonomy, and separation reign supreme. The problem here is, as we have learned over and over again in the school improvement literature, that the culture of isolation is toxic to the critical work of organizational improvement. Our sense from the field is that the community-anchored culture is an important principle and condition in the struggle to rebuild preparation programs. Departments of educational administration need to spend as much time working to create a learning organization and communities of professional practice as they do supporting skill and knowledge development of individual faculty members.

Outcome-based accountability. Our assessment is that colleagues are having a difficult time recognizing, understanding, and meeting the challenges of a new era of accountability and new ways of thinking about program development. The specter of outcome accountability has cast its shadow over preparation programs but many institutions, to date, have been unable or unwilling to grapple with that looming reality. Almost all the new energy being generated by these programs is being directed internally, to strengthening the operation of the vehicles rather than toward analyses of the appropriate destinations (foundations) and examinations of success in reaching those ports (outcome accountability). Our overriding sense is that switching the DNA of accountability from process to outcome is critical for the long-term health and long-term success of our preparation programs.

As we noted at the outset, our position is that we will not improve if we do not change. We believe that the principles described above provide a framework for appropriate change.

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