Ready From Day One: An Examination Of One Principal Preparation Program's Redesign In Collaboration With Local School Districts

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This paper presents a newly implemented model of principal preparation at a public university in the southwestern United States. The authors begin by identifying a number of innovative practices currently being carried out within educational administration programs across the United States. Informed by the context of these national models, the authors present their university's design for the readers' consideration. This is followed by a discussion of implementation issues (both positive and negative) which the administrators of this program have encountered. Finally, an evaluation matrix is presented which will be utilized in assessing the effectiveness of this principal preparation model.

Introduction

Is there a gap between theory and practice within principal preparation programs? If so, what can Universities do to increase the relevance of their programs in order to meet the needs of local school districts? A recent survey of school principals revealed that 67% of respondents felt that their principal leadership programs were out of touch with the reality of what it takes to successfully lead schools today (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet, 2003). Educational Leadership faculty themselves have recognized the problem. As Martin and Papa (2008) note, "Principal preparation places too much weight on class lectures and theory, and not enough emphasis on application" (p. 14). The President of the Teachers College at Columbia University further validated this premise when he stated that educational administration programs are irrelevant to the jobs their students will hold as school leaders (Levine, 2005). While others have criticized Levine for ignoring many positive aspects of principal preparation programs across the country (Young, 2005; Flessa, 2007), there seems to be little doubt that engaging in this debate is necessary if we are to improve current practices and re-envision what principal preparation programs could or should be. The conversation now turns to a review of the extant literature.

Literature Review

There are approximately 500 Universities currently offering principal leadership degrees/certifications across the United States (Young & Brewer, 2008). Within these programs, there are a number of exciting innovations being instituted in order to improve their impact and relevance to local schools. While this review of the literature is not meant to provide a meta-analysis of all 500 EDAD programs across the United States, it does provide important context for our own program redesign. The examples of innovation we identified fell into three categories: enhanced entry criteria; increased field-based experiences; and heightened support after graduation.

Enhanced Entry Criteria

One way that a principal preparation program can attempt to produce higher quality graduates is to enhance program entry requirements (Hess, 2003). Examples of this can be found at both the University of Louisville and the University of San Diego in which applicants must be nominated by their principal before being accepted into the leadership program (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr, 2006; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). In Jefferson County, Kentucky, the school district actually pays the tuition for up to three educational leadership courses for participants whom they have recommended (Davis, Darling Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe, 2005). Providing monetary support for candidates doubtless heightens the importance of selecting the right candidates to endorse. Another example of vetting at program entry is to have superintendents and assistant superintendents serve on the selection committee for acceptance into the program, which is the practice at Bank Street College (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). The logic behind these models is that school and district leaders are often in the best position to assess the future leadership potential of program candidates.

Another way to discern who is likely to do well in principal preparation programs is to look at GRE scores. Hines (2008) conducted a study examining the characteristics of pre-service principals in order to identify who would be most likely to pass the state principal exam. The results indicate a positive correlation between scores on the Verbal portion of the GRE and passing rates on the state principal certification exam. Thus raising the required GRE verbal score would be an easy way for an Educational Administration program to improve the passing rates of its graduates. One drawback of raising GRE verbal entry requirements is that this policy is likely to lead to fewer program participants – which one could argue may not be a bad consequence. Perhaps some programs could benefit from increasing entry criteria and decreasing the number of students who graduate with principal certification.

Increased Field-Based Experiences

Increasing the number of hours that interns spend working in local schools may hold great promise. An example of this comes from East Tennessee State University. The state of Tennessee requires that principal interns receive a minimum of 180 hours of field based experiences. However, at East Tennessee State University, students must complete 540 hours of internship experiences, which is three times greater than their state requirements (Klein, 2007). East Tennessee State provides their rationale for having their interns complete so many hours of administrative work as follows, "The purpose … is to provide leaders with the training, knowledge, and clinical experience that develop our students into effective school principals and central office administrators. Success of this mission is dependent on on-going collaborative relationships with schools and related agencies. The clinical experience provides an opportunity for students to practice and strengthen leadership skills learned during graduate preparation" (East Tennessee State University College of Education, 2012, p. 3).

A related attempt to increase field based experience comes from the University of Washington which has created a system of site surveys which they call data walks. During these data walks, faculty and graduate students work with a low performing campus to assess areas of need and create action plans to address problem areas. At the end of these data walks, recommendations are developed which focus on tangible steps that the school can take to address real problems on their campus and continuing support is offered by the University (Ginsberg & Kimball, 2008). In this way aspiring leaders have the opportunity to work with campuses that truly need assistance, which may very well be the same campuses that are likely to have frequent leadership vacancies.

At Delta State University, students are required to complete 38 weeks of field based experience, comprised of 12 weeks at each of the following levels: elementary experience, middle school experience, and high school experience, which is followed by 2 weeks experience at the central office level (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Going one step further, Wichita State University utilizes an entirely field based curriculum in which they reduce the number of classroom hours in order to maximize students experiences in the field by having them work on action research projects with local school districts (Orr, 2006). One might ask whether reducing the number of classroom hours can ever go too far. What is the correct balance between a solid theoretical foundation and field based practicality? In a sense, programs like East Tennessee State University and Wichita State University are on the leading edge of this debate by not only discussing the balance between theory and practice, but actively innovating to explore the best balance in this area.

Continued Support after Graduation

Another way that programs are helping to ensure that their graduates are ready to lead local schools is to implement exit criteria. For example, at Cal State University in Fresno, students are required to complete exit interviews at the end of each semester to ensure that they are prepared to lead local schools. These exit interviews are conducted by both program faculty and district supervisors (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). These exit interviews serve as a University assurance of a candidate's fitness to lead. It is axiomatic that the reputation of program graduates are equally yoked with their degree granting institution. As a University's reputation grows, the value of their degrees is held in higher esteem. Likewise, as graduates perform well in the workplace, school districts form opinions about the quality of the program that trained them. Providing a fitness to lead exit criteria is one way that institutions can confirm their confidence in the quality of their program graduates.

At the University of Pittsburgh, Educational Leadership faculty provide support for the local school district's current principals and teachers (many of whom graduated from the University of Pittsburgh) by connecting the University's summer professional development offerings with the needs of local school districts. (Davis, Darling Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe, 2005). This is important because it engages Universities in planning training sessions based on the stated needs of local schools. It also provides a venue to assist University faculty in staying current with the needs of local schools.

Similarly, in Washington, the Center for Educational Leadership supports both aspiring and current school leaders at various stages of career development. To begin with, aspiring leaders are supported through traditional graduate leadership coursework. This is enhanced through a leadership seminar series in which leadership modules are offered within local school districts. Finally, a summer leadership institute provides continuing training for school leaders in an ongoing model of continuous professional development (Davis, Darling Hammond, Meyerson, & LaPointe, 2005). By continuing to support school leaders well beyond graduation from school leadership programs, universities can have a greater role in the ongoing success of school leaders, and by extension, of the schools led by their program graduates. We now turn to an examination of our University's newly designed principal preparation model.

Overview of the Ready from Day One: School Leadership Consortium

This paper presents a newly implemented model of principal preparation at a public university in the southwestern United States. Prior to the redesign, the educational leadership curriculum within this program was traditional in the sense that it was largely didactic, with classes being offered exclusively on the University campus. In 2011, the Leadership faculty began a conversation with our constituents in an effort to improve upon our existing principal preparation model. The key constituents sought out were: 1) program graduates who had been hired as school administrators; 2) University faculty and administration; 4) Educational leadership faculty from other universities; and 5) School district superintendents, central office, and school leaders from 11 school districts in close geographic proximity to the University.

Based upon feedback from these constituents, the School Leadership Consortium (SLC) was created. This model was designed to blend theory and practice in order to provide a more realistic job preview to program participants (Author, 2013). This model features three primary components.

1) *A Co-teach model of instruction:* A critical innovation of this program is that courses are co-taught by school leaders working alongside University professors. This model was designed to blend theory with practice. University professors provide a solid theory base for students, while district practitioners are well positioned to explain local district practices.
2) *In-District location of courses:* Another important component of this program is that courses are located on campuses within participating districts. This not only adds convenience for participants, it also facilitates hands on experiences and adds to the gravitas in that classes are on-site where candidates hope to be employed as future school leaders, creating for all intents and purposes a 2 year job interview.
3) *Continuing education for in-service leaders:* Individual class sessions are open to any employee of the partnering districts, whether they are a student in the course or not. This provides professional development opportunities for current school leaders and allows cohort members to interact with current in-district practitioners. In this way, the Educational Leadership faculty is able to provide support to both pre-service and in-service school leaders at no additional cost to the University or the school district .

Implementation

Key Support Structures

There were a number of key support structures that laid the foundation for the successful implementation of this program. At its core, this model is built on relationships with local constituents. Our College of Education is fortunate to have key administrators who have a background in K-12 Education. Their knowledge and experience within the discipline provide an understanding of the need for closer connections between Local K-12 Education Agencies (LEAs) and institutions of higher learning. Our department established regular meetings with local superintendents, principals, and teachers to discuss program redesign. The importance of speaking regularly with representatives from the agencies that hire our program graduates cannot be overstated. As these relationships have strengthened over time, our conversations have become more open and transparent. These candid conversations were crucial in exposing the gaps where our traditional University program was failing to meet the needs of local schools, which led to the redesign of our program.

The role of tenure-track faculty was also essential. All faculty members within our program were involved in the meetings with local school districts. Each faculty member heard for themselves the successes and challenges the agencies hiring our graduates were facing. This involvement by faculty from the ground up helped lead to a sense of ownership and a willingness to change what we were doing based on the feedback of our constituents. The changes we implemented would likely not have been as well received had faculty been excluded from the design process.

Speaking with program graduates has also provided invaluable insight. We conducted interviews with program graduates who had been hired as school administrators and asked them what we were doing well and what could be done better. Interestingly, the answer to both questions was often the same. What our graduates liked best was when we brought in school district representatives as guest speakers or as panelists. These included human resource representatives, school principals, media specialists, teachers, and superintendents. What our graduates told us we could do better was to provide more opportunities to interact with these same individuals. Hearing this from our program graduates was an important point for us in designing the SLC model described above. These interviews were so impactful on faculty that we now conduct interviews with program graduates on an annual basis in order to perpetually improve our practice.

Additionally we spoke with Educational Leadership faculty members from eleven other universities in order to ascertain what worked well for them in their programs and what challenges they were currently facing. One important lesson we learned from our peers was the power of customizing programs to meet local needs. For example, one program we spoke with had moved almost exclusively online based on feedback from their constituents, while another program had moved most of its coursework into school districts, with professors travelling to schools rather than students travelling to the university. Both models worked because both were based on local needs.

Thus our University created the SLC model predicated on a co-teach model of instruction, in-district location of courses, and continuing education for current school leaders. This design was created based upon the needs of our local schools, incorporated feedback from program graduates, and was informed by best practices from other Universities. We have provided a visual representation of the administrative timeline toward implementation of this model, so that other programs considering a similar initiative can have a template on which to base their own work (see Appendix 1).

Implementation Challenges

As with any new endeavor, our implementation was not without its challenges. The first challenge we faced was with the implementation of off-site registration in school districts. Our initial goal was to offer a one-stop shop in which students who brought official sealed copies of their transcripts could apply for admission, receive advising, apply for financial aid or tuition assistance, and coordinate Veterans benefits (for those who qualified). While this may sound simple, it turned out to be somewhat challenging to coordinate. Here, the role of a strong department chair was instrumental in the successful implementation of this initiative. When faculty ran into road blocks with traditional university practices, the department chair was able to make phone calls, speak with supervisors, and helped to create a customer-centric focus which enabled the district-located registration to occur.

A potential challenge to keep in mind is the requirements of accrediting bodies. For example, offering courses off-site can constitute a substantive change to a program, depending on what percentage of coursework is offered off-site (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012). While meeting accreditation requirements is not an insurmountable challenge, it can be an unexpected one if not planned for in advance. It is therefore highly recommended that individuals considering program refinements consult with their provost's office.

The final challenge we will discuss here is the issue of finances. By offering a co-teach model of instruction, courses will cost the University more than any other class because the University is paying an adjunct salary to the district based co-teacher while simultaneously paying the regular salary of the tenure-track professor. As was mentioned earlier, we benefited from having University administrators with a K-12 Education background who fully understood the need to better blend theory with practice in principal preparation. Thus, the additional cost has not yet proven a problem for our model. However, we recognize that at some point in the future, it may become necessary to justify the additional cost to the University. This increased cost was offset by a 30% increase in enrollment. Nevertheless, we feel it is vital for us to collect outcome data to measure the effectiveness of this model in order to justify the cost. We also feel it is important to seek out partners from private industry who share in the vision of improving school leadership models so that this initiative can become self-sustaining. If the model proves to be successful, this data can be used to offer school districts and outside agencies the opportunity to invest in the perpetuation of this model and share the cost of implementation.

Next Steps: Evaluation Metrics

Some principal preparation programs are beginning to change the way they measure effectiveness. For example, at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a variety of innovative data are being collected to measure their program's success. These evaluation pieces include information on students' sense of preparedness for the job of principals, feedback on the performance of graduates once they have been hired, and the success of campuses led by program graduates (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). This concept of tying the value provided by a University to the lifelong success of its program graduates requires a dramatic shift in thinking at the higher education level. Were such a concept to be widely embraced, persistence and graduation rates as well as success on state certification exams would no longer be sufficient indicators of University success.

It is our goal to ensure that administrative candidates who graduate from our program possess the intellectual, ethical, and procedural knowledge necessary to effectively oversee the education of the students in their districts. It is therefore incumbent upon our program to ensure that these individuals provide a measurable benefit to the schools in which they serve. We propose that an external evaluator be hired to measure program outcomes. Because the School Leadership Consortium (SLC) coexists with our traditional University based model of principal preparation there exists an opportunity to compare the success of SLC cohort students with the outcomes of non SLC cohort students within the University. We also intend to compare our outcomes with those of other principal programs across the region. We will evaluate the success of each of our programs based on the following criteria: graduation rates, certification rates, level of self-efficacy upon graduation, growth in level of self-efficacy throughout the program, hiring rates, longevity in the field, and the success of K-12 schools led by program graduates (See Appendix 2).

Graduation rates and passing rates on state certification exams are two useful traditional methods of evaluating program effectiveness. Because the state subsidizes tuition for our in-state residents, we believe it is paramount that we be good stewards of these public funds. Ensuring that students persist to graduation and have learned the requisite skills to pass our state's principal certification exam is an important baseline measure of programmatic success.

In addition to these traditional outcome measures, we will be administering a self-assessment of administrator self-efficacy. A number of research studies have identified a correlation between educator self-efficacy and student achievement (Bandura, 1996; Bandura, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). Accordingly, it is our intent to provide all of the students seeking principal certification within our University with a measure of self-efficacy before beginning coursework (which will serve as a baseline indicator in their belief in their own readiness for school leadership). Students will be asked to complete the same survey when they have finished coursework. A pre-test, post-test design will be utilized to assess any change in participants' beliefs regarding their ability to serve as school leaders.

We have found that some of our graduates are hired immediately upon graduation, while others find employment as administrators in subsequent years, depending on their own interests, abilities, and school district needs. We believe collecting data on hiring rates is crucial information that should be shared with potential students so that they can make informed decisions as intelligent consumers. We also believe hiring rates are important as a measure of a school district's beliefs in the strength of our program. If schools have a hand in helping to prepare future school leaders within their own district, this provides them with a "grow your own" future leadership model and gives them the opportunity to evaluate potential candidates over a two year job interview.

The final two evaluation measures we have selected are longitudinal. It will take years to collect data in the areas of longevity and success of our students' students, but we feel the collection of this data is vital in order to gain a more complete picture of the relative value our program is adding to schools in our area. According to Young and Fuller (2009), the average principal position comes open every 3 ½ years. Unfortunately, theorists in the field of change leadership concur that in order for change initiatives to be successful, leadership must be in place for a minimum of 3-5 years (Fullan, 1991). Thus, the revolving door of the Principalship is creating a scenario in which principals are not allowed the time or necessary support to implement successful change (Author, 2012). Accordingly, measuring the length of time our graduates serve in principal positions will be an important indication as to their ability to positively effect change on their campuses.

The final measure we plan to track is the relative value added to a campus that employs one of our graduates as a principal. Years of research into the correlates of effective schools have revealed that school leaders provide the single largest indirect effect upon student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Levine & Lezotte, 1990). What this means is that although principals do not directly provide instruction to students, the decisions they make and the environment they foster create the structures that either hinder or enable student success (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). It should be noted that this data will take years to collect because most new graduates are hired as assistant principals. It will likely take 3-5 years after graduation before these individuals are strong candidates for principal positions. Once they are employed as principals, we believe that data should be collected for a minimum of three years before we can begin to attribute a campus' success in any way to the role of the school leader. Thus it will likely be a minimum of 6-8 years before meaningful data will exist for our program in this area. By collecting short term, intermediate, and longitudinal data, we plan to perpetually refine our model in order to better prepare our graduates so that they are ready from day one to positively impact schools in our region.

Conclusion

This paper presents a new model of principal preparation that is designed to better meet the leadership needs of K-12 schools in our region. By involving local school districts in the preparation of their own future leaders, it is anticipated that graduates of this program will add significant value to the schools in which they are called to serve. We acknowledge there are many innovative and effective models of principal preparation being implemented throughout the United States and internationally. It is our goal to share our model with our colleagues in higher education so as to add to the growing body of literature in this field as together we strive to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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Appendix 1: Timeline for Initial Program Implementation of the Ready from Day One: School Leadership Consortium

- Foundation
  - Relationships with constituents built over time
- 24 months before implementation
  - Meet with individuals who represent agencies who are hiring program graduates – ask what can be done to provide a better employee who will be ready from day 1.
  - Meet with program graduates who are now working as administrators – ask them what the program did well to prepare them for their career and what the program can do better
  - Investigate what other Universities in the area are doing – what can be learned from them?
- 18 months before implementation
  - Contact district(s) to explore initial interest in hosting a cohort
- 12 months before cohort begins
  - Meet face to face with superintendent(s) interested in possible participation, provide them with timeline for implementation and sample Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- 9 months before cohort begins
  - MOUs should be signed for upcoming cohort to begin 10 months from now, identify likely co-teachers, determine times/locations for informational and registration sessions, determine times/locations for courses; determine how participants will be selected/invited to participate
- 8 months before cohort begins
  - Send initial email inviting possible participants to attend information session for an overview of the upcoming cohort
- 7 months before cohort begins
  - Send follow up email inviting participants to attend informational session
  - Conduct Initial informational session – provide information on state requirements for principal certification; University requirements; program design; program cost; dates/times/locations for courses
  - Send follow up email to students who attended informational session giving them a copy of the presentation, information on how to apply, and dates and times of upcoming registration session
- 6 months before cohort begins
  - Invite and ask for RSVP responses for On-site registration session;
  - Conduct on-site registration session – bring representatives from admissions/enrollment/graduate advising/financial aid/ and Veterans Affairs
  - Solidify list of participants
  - Submit map of co-taught class to department chair for course scheduling purposes
- 5 months before cohort begins
  - Have University post adjunct position
  - Interview potential district co-teachers
- 4 months before cohort begins
  - Select school district co-teachers

- Introduce district co-teacher to the University Faculty member with whom they will be co-teaching
    - Follow up with selected candidates – ensure they have all information needed
- 3 months before class begins
    - Co-teachers co-plan for courses
        - University professor should send co-teacher a copy of the syllabus and a desk-copy of the textbook,
        - Meet for planning session(s) to modify course syllabus based on co-teachers areas of expertise/interest and student learning goals for the course.
    - Ensure enough copies of books exist for book loan program – order more if necessary.
- 2 months before class begins
    - Ensure all participants are registered for course
    - Check in on co-teachers to ensure they have everything they need;
    - Both the Faculty member and the co-teachers should identify specific topics that they wish to identify for free professional development opportunities in the district.
- 1 month before class begins
    - Ensure all participants have a map to the location of first class; copy of the syllabus; and information on how to obtain books from book-loan program
- First day of class
    - invite Department chair/Dean/Superintendents to join first session in order to welcome participants to the cohort;
    - Distribute textbooks for book loan program for those students who have not yet picked up a copy
    - Introduce co-teachers; take a break to give VIP guests opportunity to remain or to leave; and begin class

Appendix 2: Evaluation Matrix

	Date Data to be Collected	Data Source	School Leadership Consortium Model	Traditional University Based Model	Average Results for the State (if info is available)
Graduation Rate	Annually in May	Higher Ed Coordinating Board			
Passing Rate on State Certification Exam	Annually in September	State Education Agency			
Exiting Self-Efficacy Score	Annually in May	Internal University survey			
Self-Efficacy Growth	Annually in May	Internal University survey			
Percentage of graduates employed as school or district leaders	Annually in September	State Public Education Information Management System Database			
Average number of years graduates serve in given leadership positions	Annually, in September	State Public Education Information Management System Database			
Relative Value Added to Campuses led by program graduates	Annually, in December	Indices 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the State Academic Performance Report			