

A School-University Partnership in Administrator Preparation:

Learnings and Subsequent Questions

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Abstract: School university partnerships have become important in the reform efforts to develop the next generation of school leaders. This study examines one university's approach of working with several school districts as partners in the development of school leaders. Findings include benefits and concerns from the perspective of students, faculty, and adjunct instructors.

Introduction

Included in the challenges facing education today is “the dual problem of how to improve the quality of school administrators and how to attract more qualified applicants for positions in school leadership” (Price, 2004, p. 36). The Sylvan-AASA principal preparation program, the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Leadership Initiative, and the efforts of the State Action for Educational Leadership Preparation (SAELP) are examples of changes occurring in the field of leadership preparation to address these challenges.

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Educational leadership faculty find themselves wondering what role university preparation programs will play in these new programs. Blair (2004) and Young (2003) reported that the role of institutions of higher education in the preparation and continuing education of teachers and principals remains under fire. Young described a widespread assumption that institutions of higher education are not doing their jobs and that educators are not adequately preparing leaders for the nation's schools. In addition, many states are moving away from university-based programs as a pre-requisite for an administrative credential (National Center for Education Information, 2004).

The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership (NCALP) met recently to grapple with higher education's role in school leadership programs (Hull, 2003). Recommendations from this meeting included suggestions for the preparation of school leaders in the areas of "university-stakeholder partnerships, program content and delivery, program evaluation and accountability, university institutional factors, and policy" (p. 14). A forthcoming California report (*CSU Presidents' Task Force on Education Leadership Programs, 2004*), based on a statewide Task Force study, makes ten recommendations for improving leadership preparation; two of which speak to partnerships between universities and school districts and specifically mention the need for collaborative design, delivery, and support of educational leadership programs.

In response to a perceived lack of connection between university preparation programs for teachers and administrators and the field, some universities have initiated partnerships with local school districts to strengthen programs and provide greater relevance to the work in schools and to increase the number of qualified candidates for the principalship (Whitaker & Barnett, 1999). Hoyle (2003) would agree that such partnerships are necessary. He contends that in developing future school executives, universities need, among other ideas, to include school districts in the selection of students, to focus the curriculum on actual school data, and to include assignments that are centered on improving student learning. Citing an example of such work, Kottkamp (2003) noted that Hofstra University's educational leadership program attaches each learning community to a partner school district, in which the "partner district leaders participate in classes and classes convene in the district" (p. 19), and that real district problems become part of the curriculum.

As with any approach to preparing leaders, school-university coalitions have advantages and challenges. This article addresses the emerging trend of schools and universities working together in meeting the challenges of joint preparation of school leaders. The characteristics of school-university partnerships nationally are explored, data collected

from existing school district-university partnerships in principal preparation are reported, and finally, questions for future research of interest to university faculty and district partners are suggested.

Characteristics of School-University Partnerships

The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership programs (Hull, 2003) recommended that College of Education Deans and Department of Education officials collaborate in identifying and adopting essential characteristics of partnerships that support effective leadership preparation. The Commission suggested supporting the collaboration of university faculty and leaders from school districts in program planning, program delivery, and course delivery by faculty-practitioner teams as well as recommending internship development and joint supervision of future leaders.

Many of these school-university partnerships have come to be known as *grow-your-own* efforts. Features of these programs include use of cohort models, district input on selection of candidates, jointly designed curriculum and instruction, on-site delivery of courses, formal mentoring, and the use of practitioners-scholars as instructors in the program (Whitaker & Barnett, 1999).

As more and more university and school districts develop partnerships for preparing school leaders, questions have emerged regarding which features are most effective within these partnership arrangements. The literature reveals few research studies on the topic. In a review of business and educational partnerships, Grobe, Curnan, and Melchior (1990) reported that successful partnerships:

- ◆ Involve top-level leadership in decisions;
- ◆ Develop programs that are grounded in the needs of the community;
- ◆ Create an effective public relations campaign;
- ◆ Establish clear roles and responsibilities of each partner;
- ◆ Employ strategic planning and develop long-term goals;
- ◆ Utilize effective management and staffing structures;
- ◆ Ensure that shared decision making and local ownership occur;
- ◆ Provide shared recognition and credit for all personnel involved;
- ◆ Commit resources that are appropriate and well-timed;
- ◆ Provide intensive technical assistance;
- ◆ Create formal written agreements; and
- ◆ Are patient with the change process and gradually expand the involvement of others.

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Michelle Young (2003), Executive Director of the University Council for Educational Administration, has written of the need to link leadership preparation to student learning and noted that some research is being undertaken to that end (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Young suggested that, until such research is further along, there are certain known components that make a program effective. These include having:

- ◆ Professional development of faculty;
- ◆ An advisory board of practitioners;
- ◆ Involvement of practitioners in planning, teaching, field internships, and mentoring;
- ◆ Alignment of program to best practices in leadership preparation (e.g., adult learning principles, problem-based learning, authentic assessment, mentoring);
- ◆ Coherent program design and delivery; and
- ◆ Development of program around a set of standards (e.g., ISLLC). (p. 6)

Again, an emphasis on practitioners as advisors, planners, teachers, and mentors is apparent. Trachtman (as cited in Grobe, Curnan & Melchior, 1990) suggested that identifying true partnerships will entail answering the question, “Who benefits from the arrangement?” (p. 6). If the answer is not all parties, then the arrangement is not a true partnership. Meeting short-term needs, such as ameliorating the shortage of principals, without a strong basis for the program and a commitment for ongoing work from the partners, may result in a program without an appropriate foundation and support. Such programs typically will not endure.

An Example of a School-University Partnership

Believing it was time for universities to join with school districts to improve leadership preparation, a university system office provided incentives to include practitioners in the work of educational leadership programs with grants to five campuses from 2001 to 2003. The stated purpose of the grants was to help solve a principal shortage, to assist districts in growing-their-own, and to encourage university faculty to work more closely with the field. Each campus was to join with school districts to develop future school leaders.

Pilot Program

One of the universities in the system began an education administra-

tion collaborative program with K-12 partners. The collaborative began with a pilot program consisting of an elementary and a high school district, 25 students, three university faculty, and four adjunct faculty/district personnel in 2001-2002 (Basom & Yerkes, 2004). The key characteristics of the collaborative, which had consistent, open communications in planning and instructional delivery as hallmarks included:

- ◆ The College of Education Dean initiated the program in conjunction with the school district superintendents and faculty. The program coordinator met with participating superintendents and administrators to conceptualize and design the program.
- ◆ Based on an assessment of leadership capabilities and potential, candidates were recommended by administrators in their districts. Students were also required to meet the university and department entrance criteria.
- ◆ District administrators and retired administrators served as university fieldwork supervisors. They worked closely with a small group of district employees in a mentoring role. They also monitored the students' evolving educational platforms and portfolios, guiding students and providing feedback as the students developed and learned during the program.
- ◆ District superintendents and assistant superintendents taught in the program. Classes were held in district facilities.
- ◆ Course curricula were planned and taught jointly by professors and key district administrators. Professors and administrators met weekly to plan class sessions and develop any necessary mid-course corrections.
- ◆ Collaboration between district administrators and the university professors served to ensure alignment of the program curriculum with national and state standards for school leaders.
- ◆ Districts provided guest speakers on topics such as school curriculum, student assessment, and local children's services. Addressing specific district foci enriched the curriculum.
- ◆ Cohort building activities were included to give students, as well as their faculty and administrators, opportunities to become a learning community.
- ◆ Feedback was provided to students on a regular basis to ensure their success in the program.

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- ◆ Students had an opportunity to get to know and talk with their district administrators each week for two semesters.
- ◆ The program gave district administrators a chance to see their employees in action in many and varied situations, thus providing them with considerable information in terms of future administrative hiring.

Positive indications and preliminary survey data from students and district personnel encouraged the continuation and expansion of the program. To date, 11 of the first 25 students have been selected for administrative positions and three have served for extended periods as interim principals.

Continuation

In the second year, 2002-2003, two cohorts began and two off-campus sites served as classrooms. Eleven districts participated and 42 students were enrolled. During that year, two university faculty and 11 adjunct faculty/district personnel coordinated, planned, taught, and mentored. Student fees made the program self-supporting, as state funding was no longer available. To date, 14 students from one cohort have been promoted to leadership positions and in the other cohort, three have been promoted and one served as summer school principal.

In the third year, 2003-2004, there were again two cohorts: one cohort involved six districts, 25 students, three adjunct faculty/district personnel and one full-time university lecturer. The second cohort involved four school districts, 27 students, two adjunct faculty/district personnel, and two university faculty.

Program Evaluation

Initial efforts at evaluation seem to indicate program success in that several students have found administrative positions, districts wish to continue the collaboration, and applicants still number many more than can be accommodated. Of course, long-term effects, particularly on student learning, are still to be seen. Survey and interview data have provided additional information on which the planners will depend for further refinement.

Surveys were used to collect data from students, adjunct faculty, and university faculty who had participated in some way in the partnership programs. In the summers of the first two years, surveys were given to students in their classes and then collected and analyzed. In the first

year, surveys were also given to faculty and adjunct faculty. In the second year, a conversation, based on a series of questions, was held with faculty in one cohort. The researchers were particularly interested in the benefits and challenges of the program as they were identified from the perspective of faculty and adjuncts as well as students.

Findings

The benefits as reported by students far outweighed any challenges or concerns. Faculty responses were mixed. Students and district adjuncts unanimously requested that the university continued its support of the program. The following list delineates some of the mentioned benefits and challenges as perceived by students and faculty. Each area is explored separately.

Benefits from Students' Perspectives

1. The convenience and efficiency of a one-year model was described as extremely helpful. Students reported that condensing offerings from the previous two-year cycle to a one-year program was very appealing in terms of time required for earning a credential.

2. Practical, relevant instruction driven by district leaders' actual experiences was seen as a plus. However, this instruction was the students' only experience with administrative credentialing programs and provided no data suggesting this was not the norm in other credentialing programs.

3. District leaders helped move instruction away from text to instruction based on district issues of concern. This type of instruction was seen by students as a plus, but was a concern to faculty who believed that instruction needed to be grounded in theory as well as practice.

4. The partnership was seen as a plus for district representatives to train and look for prospective administrators.

5. Conveniently located meeting places was one of the most-cited student benefits. Given the traffic patterns of any major city at the time most graduate classes are offered, the benefit of having classes offered in a student's own or adjacent school district was a major draw.

6. The affordability of a state-supported program was seen as a benefit in assisting students to gain a credential at a reasonable cost.

7. Two classes lasting a total of five hours were scheduled during one evening each week. Students with busy work and personal schedules perceived this as easier to manage than attending on two evenings. However, the fatigue level of students at the end of such long evenings was a drawback.

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8. This partnership's *tap-on-the-shoulder* recruiting gave students added confidence that someone valued their abilities, and helped shape their future commitment to becoming administrators in the district.

9. Students began to see themselves as teacher-leaders. They reported better understanding the need to support change at the building level and not just in their classrooms. They indicated more of a commitment to take on additional school-wide leadership roles.

10. Professors gained experience in the local districts and thus enriched the learning experience of students in the partnership.

11. The program's positive impact on students stimulated a district-wide interest in administrative credentials. Students, who were put off by the challenges of taking administrative classes, were willing to investigate this program given the positive comments by their peers in the program.

12. Students understood and appreciated the effort to blend research, theory, and practice. They reported that program professors brought strong theory elements, and the adjunct professors designed lessons and field experience activities that related to the theory.

13. Students reported that the faculty was respectful of students as educational professionals and busy people.

14. Students felt supported throughout the program and appreciated the emphasis on building a learning community. Faculty hoped these activities will find their way into the practice of these educators as they build learning communities in their own schools.

Challenges from Students' Perspective

As mentioned, students perceived the benefits of the partnership program far outnumbered any challenges. However, the following list of self-described challenges was helpful to program directors in making changes:

1. Students were critical of the "time crunch in getting in required internship hours in one year while taking all classes." Students were required to perform 450 hours of administrative service over the course of the program. The department has since revised its fieldwork requirements to include a series of activities that need to be accomplished instead of a required number of hours.

2. Some students noted that more rigor was necessary as individuals could coast on group efforts in this program. The program utilized a cohort model, adult learning principles, and several group activities. Faculty and adjuncts have become better at outlining individual as well as group expectations for projects and at finding ways for students to assess each other's efforts and including that in the grading system.

3. Some students argued for fewer “small assignments, and more encompassing assignments.” Faculty has since developed assignments that encompass more of the course objectives.

4. There appeared to be a reluctance of students to “ask questions when the superintendent is in attendance.” This reluctance to speak in front of the superintendent was a concern for students and faculty alike. As the cohorts have grown to include students from more than one district, this concern has been somewhat ameliorated.

5. While district administrators’ involvement in the selection of program participants was looked upon as a benefit, some saw it as a potential detriment. Some students were concerned that those not in a districts’ *in crowd* would not be selected. Others were concerned about whether some of the administrative team really knew how to select potentially good leaders.

6. While the one-year duration of the program was seen as a plus, several related issues were seen as challenges. The short program made it necessary for students to do more work outside the classroom, and that aspect of the program seemed to infringe significantly on their time. Also, since the number of required credits did not change, some students felt the short timeline made it more difficult for them to secure the needed financial resources over that period of time versus over a two-year period.

Benefits from Faculty Perspective

The university-school partnership described above provided faculty an opportunity to celebrate. Strengths, as perceived by university faculty and district adjuncts, were as follows:

1. Interaction between university faculty and school administration provided for a rich learning environment. The combination of professor and practitioner afforded faculty with a way to see the theory tested in practice through discussions and examinations of real-life school situations.

2. The program provided district administrators a way to assess the potential leadership skills of their employees, which was a recurring theme with district administrators who taught in the program. Seeing teachers in different roles afforded administrators the opportunity to evaluate the talent of individuals in ways, which may not have otherwise occurred.

3. The partnership program helped to create a pool of teacher-leaders from which the district leadership teams could select members for important district committee work

4. The program helped university faculty connect to the current and

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real world of school leadership. Weekly planning and interactive teaching sessions with district administrators gave faculty a fresh perspective on working with current school issues. The program afforded individual faculty members the opportunities to develop new relationships with public school administrators and programs. For some, avenues for research were opened.

Challenges as Perceived by University Faculty

The university-school partnership also provided faculty with the opportunity to question and grow. The following thoughts were seen as potential challenges by university faculty who participated in the school-university partnership project:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the university curriculum was a primary concern for university faculty. Local school administrators expect the program to include what they see as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes principals should acquire. Some adjuncts wanted the program to center on what their district was looking for in a principal. Many times, however, those ideas were not based on current research or the norms of the profession. Faculty wondered: How much say should practitioners have in what should be taught, how it should be taught, and in deciding what assignments should be given to measure the learning?

2. The University is responsible for awarding the administrative credential and, for some students, the Master's degree. Awarding these degrees and credentials becomes problematic if the content being taught by adjuncts does not match the Educational Leadership curricula or the required State standards. Faculty members then asked: Who should be responsible for ascertaining that the course content meets program standards?

3. In some instances, although practitioners have current experience as administrators, some have not taught in a long time. Knowledge of effective adult learning and teaching theory is often not their strength. Faculty wondered: Would the university be willing to compensate and support faculty for their involvement in helping adjuncts develop effective teaching skills?

4. The increased time and energy required of faculty to teach in these programs can be a challenge. Time for working with adjuncts on teaching skills, developing curricula, planning teaching segments, and team teaching takes an enormous toll on faculty. The University will need to revisit the time required of faculty teaching in these programs if they wish to sustain them.

5. A condensed one-year program is challenging to faculty and students alike. Faculty mentioned they begrudged what they felt as

pressure from adjuncts to demand less of students because students were over-burdened with assignments and the realities of the workplace.

6. The selection process was aided by the input and the *tap-on-the-shoulder* approach initiated by district administrators. The challenge for faculty, however, was the need to balance this approach with an assessment based on more objective data. Equity and searching out potential leaders who may not *fit the district mold* merits consideration.

Reflections

Overall, data indicated that some students had questions about having their superintendents in the room, or teaching their class, when they were struggling with new ideas. On the other hand, district leaders reported that they gained increased and valuable information about their future administrators from having spent a semester with them.

While faculty believed the rich environment created by the partnership better connected them to the real world of schooling, they wondered whether the theory and more global views of leadership might be lost as the day-to-day issues and the districts' methods of operation come to the fore at many class meetings. Data also indicated that students were pleased with the blend of theory and practice and the richer learning experience and saw few difficulties with the programs except that the demands on their time were great. University faculty members saw many benefits but were concerned about the loss of autonomy with the curriculum.

Some Progress

Goodlad (1999, 2000) was at the forefront of the work of building school-university partnerships. He encouraged the simultaneous renewal of public schools and colleges of education. Much of Goodlad's work has been making steady progress, particularly in the area of teacher education, and has generated such strong examples as Professional Development Schools. There is very little in the literature, however, about such renewal projects that focus on school principals and faculty.

We believe that building coalitions with local school districts to prepare school administrators is a concept whose time has come. This article is an attempt to contribute to the research on how principals are prepared in partnership programs. While many universities are trying various approaches, the literature would indicate that few are documenting their efforts, particularly when it comes to school-university collaborations. We hope this research on practice will provide depart-

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ments of educational leadership with data to make informed decisions about future programming.

Need for Further Investigation

Given the paucity of research in this area, we believe there is much yet to investigate. Several areas in need of additional research are offered below for readers' reflection and future research efforts.

1. How can university professors and school practitioners work toward assuring that partnership programs include components of effective programs (Young, 2003) that educators know work?

2. Fullan (2002) wrote that work on reforms "will amount to naught without the opportunity to learn in and help change contexts" (p. 17); therefore, how can preparing principals through partnership programs help change the contexts in which future leaders will work?

3. How do faculty maintain the integrity of the university curriculum given that practitioners are prone to teach their district's practices? What university support systems can be initiated to help adjuncts become effective adult educators?

4. What benefits or challenges do students face by having their local administrators (sometimes direct supervisors) engaged with them in the discussion of critical school reform issues?

5. How can the traditional university expectations for faculty be changed to compensate for the increased tasks and time involved with team teaching and group planning?

6. How can the university and school districts remain full partners in difficult budget times when resources may be reduced?

A Word of Caution

In university faculty attempts to develop successful public school-university partnerships for the training of school leaders, there is a need to be careful that *grow-your-own* and alternative programs created primarily to address shortages provide the profession with candidates who meet high standards. "If one principal is not properly trained and up to the task of leadership, it will have a damaging effect on hundreds of students— an unacceptable thought. Multiply those hundreds of students by several thousand times, and one can readily see the impending problem society faces with a shortage of qualified school leaders who possess the will and the conviction to make a difference" (Tirozzi, 2001, p. 438). By continuing to initiate quality partnership programs, re-

searching and sharing what is learned, and continuing the conversation with the school practitioners who will hire program graduates, university faculty can contribute to improving the work of preparing effective school leaders.

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