

Let's Change the Way We Prepare Principals

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 redefined the role of school leadership. NCLB includes several implicit reforms, one of which involves changing the preparation programs for administrators who are expected to lead learning organizations in an era of high-stakes testing.

Colleges awarding degrees that lead to administrative licensure are adopting rigorous admission standards as a way of selecting applicants with the greatest potential for leadership, and with predictable effects. Urban school districts in the 1970s could have expected 40 applicants for a principal's position. Since 2003, that number has dwindled to nine. The Educational Research Service (1998) predicts that by 2010, nearly 40 percent of all public school principals will retire or leave the profession, while the number of administrative jobs available will grow by 20 percent.

Jazzar and Algozzine (2006), former school administrators now working at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, suggest that fewer people are seeking school leadership positions because principals are expected to accomplish more with fewer resources while facing greater accountability from policy-makers, parents, and the public. Their meta-analyses of research about administrator training programs identified "a hazardous mixture of critical conditions that transcended every level and demographic group of principals: time and overload, increasing responsibilities, work-related stress, salary, and institutional interference."

The Pipeline to Instructional Leadership

Where will tomorrow's school leaders come from, and what skills and traits must they have to succeed in the mixture of critical conditions Jazzar and Algozzine described?

Tolerance for change and ambiguity is an essential trait for leaders because federal and state laws, and demands for accountability, have altered community

expectations of schools. Tomorrow's principals must be adept at understanding research on student achievement, analyzing data and using results to make decisions, and adopting leading and learning strategies that empower students and teachers.

Without a legislative mandate for reform, college programs that prepare administrators have been slow to change. NCLB requires a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, but it makes no reference to programs that prepare school leaders.

Historically, administrative candidates have been encouraged to *think* about leadership by learning about organizational and management theories. Providing school-based field experiences for them was deemed costly and impractical, and replicating the intensity and rapid pace of a principal's day was impossible.

The Solution

A one-semester school-based internship will be the hallmark of quality of tomorrow's administrative preparation programs. Aspiring principals will learn through firsthand experience while receiving prompt, formative feedback from exemplary principal-mentors and college faculty to ensure that they have a wide range of leadership opportunities. They will be expected to lead committees, work with unruly students, hold meetings with parents, address teachers' concerns, and immerse themselves in the challenges of school administration.

The path to leadership begins with program admission. Applicants will be chosen after completing a thorough screening procedure during which they will provide proof of their profes-

sional competence and demonstrate proficiency in writing. They also will undergo a structured interview with a panel of district administrators and professors to assess their capacity for leadership.

After being admitted, candidates will discover a revised curriculum that integrates theory with application in schools. They will be asked to demonstrate competence with technology, data analysis, teaching and learning, human resource development, and diversity, planning, and community relations *before* becoming school leaders, not afterward.

Creating such a program isn't just a lofty goal. The University of South Alabama is one of four universities in the state working on a program redesign based on these principles.

Tomorrow's principals will have different skills than did their predecessors. Rigorous admission requirements, an authentically assessed internship supervised by carefully selected district administrators and college faculty, and a new curriculum that includes intensive school-based experiences will better equip them to navigate the hazardous conditions prevalent in an era of school reform. **P**

David Gray is chair of the department of leadership and teacher education at the University of South Alabama. His e-mail address is dgray@usouthal.edu.

References

- Educational Research Service. *Information for School Leaders*. Arlington, Va.: Author, 1998.
- Jazzar, M. and B. Algozzine. *Critical Issues in Educational Leadership*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2006.

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author calls for reforming the current structure of principal preparation programs. Do you agree with his solution? What components do you believe would produce the most effective program?

Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to www.naesp.org/speakingout.