Examining the Principal Preparation and Practice Gap

Effective principal preparation requires a partnership between school districts and universities.

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To anticipate the future needs of principal preparation, we must understand past efforts to bridge the preparation and practice gap. Decades ago, both the military and corporate industries discovered that classroom training was not meeting their needs for preparing soldiers and business professionals for real-life challenges. So they shifted training from classrooms to on-the-job training. Further assessments showed that leaving classrooms behind did not solve the problem. So they turned to a combination of classroom instruction and on-the-job training, which entailed a back-and-forth method of learning basics and concepts in class, application of the concepts in real-life situations, and back to the classroom for reflection, assessment, and further learning. This model is still widely used today and offers a viable partnership option for universities and school districts to consider when preparing principals.
The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) is dedicated to finding solutions to the preparation and practice divide. Closing the gap between university preparation and real-world practice, however, continues to require that major obstacles be addressed and resolved.

Many educational leadership programs serve educators who are not interested in the principalship.

Educators enter leadership programs for a variety of reasons. For example, some educators enroll because states and districts link salaries and promotions to hours completed beyond a bachelor’s degree, or because education master’s degree programs offer fewer options other than leadership. Others enroll because they believe that they will want to apply for a leadership position in the future.

Because many leadership and certification programs rely on open enrollment and self-selection for qualifying students, many educational leadership programs serve educators who are not principal candidates, diminishing the programs’ effectiveness.

To strengthen the pool of those preparing for the principalship, school districts should partner with universities to select candidates for master’s degrees and entry-level administrative certification programs. For example, students at the University of Houston must meet high GRE requirements and be recommended by their districts for admission. As a result, 100 percent of the candidates passed the state licensure exam and 100 percent were hired in administrative positions.

Principal preparation places too much weight on class lectures and theory, and not enough emphasis on application.

Understanding theory and the larger conceptual framework of leadership is critical to effective practice and improvement; however, leadership is best learned by doing. Universities must link field-based activities to theory in ways that meet the needs of adult learners and the schools they serve. Partnering school systems with university programs to design curricula, activities, research, and assessment strategies is an effective method to finding appropriate balance between theory and practice.

Publications such as NAESP’s second edition of Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do present standards based on collaborative research. The publication is now required reading for all prospective elementary principals at Northern Arizona University.

Communication and collaboration between universities and school districts is ineffective.

There are many examples of successful research collaborations between school districts and universities, but they tend to be short-termed, isolated, and sporadic. NAESP and NCPEA should encourage, support, and disseminate joint research projects and best practices of school district and university collaboration through journals, conferences, and open access Web sites.

For example, Connexions is a Web-based, open-access education project that makes course notes, resources, and textbooks available to anyone. The Connexions project was initially developed by engineers from Rice University to share engineering programs, and NCPEA endeavored to accomplish the same for leadership development programs. Since all information on Connexions is available without copyright requests, professors and practitioners alike can share learning in this virtual portal.

Another effective strategy for collaboration between universities and school districts is exercised at Eastern Carolina University, where mentoring and professional development between professors and graduates is required during a graduate’s first few years of administration.

Principal preparation programs provide inconsistently configured systems for shared, continued learning.

University principal preparation programs are designed to provide basic knowledge and skills for entry-level administrators and a foundation for them to continue lifelong learning. Practicing principals use many methods to continue their training, such as attending local, state, and national conferences and meetings, and joining book clubs. But these examples typically arise from individual initiatives instead of district, state, or national directives. NAESP and NCPEA members must collaborate to ensure uniform continued leadership development for principals.

There is a paucity of published data from principals that reflect both applied research and the realities of school administration.

Many principals have neither the time nor the training to conduct applied research. Adding to this disparity is that by the time many professors publish research findings, they have been out of day-to-day administrative practice for many years. By working together, however, principals and professors can form a highly competent and expert publishing team. The solution to the shortage of practical administration research is systematic, planned, and coordinated collaboration between principals and professors.

Greater collaboration between national educational leadership organizations is needed.

Collaboration between national educational leadership organizations can advance the quality of both preparation and practice of school administrators. NAESP and NCPEA are well on their way to fostering such a collaborative environment. For example, NCPEA held its first conference-within-a-conference at NAESP’s 2008 Annual Convention & Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee. NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly is supportive of further collaboration with NCPEA and we at NCPEA believe this partnership is crucial to reach our shared goal of providing the necessary leadership for the students of our nation.
There is insufficient time and funding for full-time internships for aspiring principals.

The principal internship is the culminating experience of the university preparation program and the initial step into the reality of school leadership, serving as the transition point between university training and school practice. However, given that not all interns want to become principals and there is no guarantee that interns will remain in the district or that they possess the ability to successfully lead, districts and states are hesitant to provide this large investment in time and expense.

Ideal internships comprise a year-long, full-time administration rotation with co-supervision between a principal and professor. District and university partnering can provide the ideal learning environment for the student while serving the district at the same time. For example, at Northern Arizona University, students begin logging internship hours in their first course and continue with the application of learning with leadership activities throughout the degree program. Examples of activities include a legal compliance review, supervising and observing instruction, conducting a curriculum, climate, and culture audit, and resolving a current issue in the school or district. A few years ago, one student saved her district $2 million in her issue resolution project.

NAESP and NCPEA should work together with other members of the National Policy Board of Educational Administration to resolve these concerns and enact legislation that would provide the necessary time and funding for principal internships.

The extremely stressful job of the principal offers inadequate compensation, which deters many competent teacher leaders from entering the profession.

In most districts, veteran teachers who move from the classroom to administration actually take a cut in their daily rate of pay. They also move from direct interaction with students to meetings, paperwork, and complaints from parents, students, and community members.

In addition to providing higher salaries, we must advocate for changing the role of the school principal. Principals need more administrative help and community involvement, greater use of teacher leaders, and improved technology in order for their jobs to be more manageable.

NCPEA professors, who are former school administrators and primarily teach at comprehensive state universities, prepare the most newly certified principals nationwide. That being noted, NCPEA members highly regard practicing administrators and believe many solutions to the issues discussed in this article lie in building collaborative relationships. There is no consensus on these issues and there are no easy answers. However, serious research, dialogue, and study by NAESP and NCPEA members are sorely needed in this extremely important call to re-examine the principal preparation and practice gap.

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WEB RESOURCES

Visit the Principal archives for a themed issue on training tomorrow’s principals. The articles from the May/June 2005 issue address principal preparation programs, peer coaching, and leadership development for urban schools.

www.naesp.org/principal

Southern Regional Education Board’s publication, The Principal Internship: How Can We Get It Right?, makes the case for quality principal field experiences and surveys principal internship programs.

www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/pubs/05V02_Principal_Internship.pdf

On the Connexions Web site, scholars and practitioners alike can collaborate to create instructional modules.

www.cnx.org