Leadership Development: THE PRINCIPAL UNIVERSITY CONNECT

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Principals and universities are forging new relationships based on their common goal of providing effective school leadership in the NCLB era.
Since January 8, 2002, when President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, attention has been increasingly focused on the need for schools to provide the nation’s children with a “fair, equitable, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.” An essential element in this effort is the law’s insistence on school accountability. Failure to meet annual progress goals can lead to serious penalties, including replacement of the principal or even state takeover of the school. The stakes are indeed high for the nation’s principals.

In response to the increasing demands for higher student achievement that are being placed on principals, state departments of education, school districts, and principals themselves are turning to universities for advice, collaboration, and leadership. Although

**IN BRIEF**

The author emphasizes the need for universities to overhaul principal preparation programs to comply with the NCLB goal of improved student achievement, both in their curriculums and the quality of their students. He provides several examples of partnerships between universities and schools to reshape preparation programs and provide authentic leadership development.
leadership development programs provided by universities have not adequately prepared principals to undertake the new demands of school administration, practitioners must recognize the need to form meaningful partnerships with universities if preparation programs and principals are to meet the goals set by NCLB.

The need for higher-quality preparation programs comes none too soon. While the responsibilities attached to the principal’s position have undergone enormous expansion in the last decade, it is commonly acknowledged that many principal preparation programs remain devoid of a reality base, providing course work that is too theoretical and simply unrelated to the daily tasks principals face. As a result, candidates for the principalship do not develop the practical knowledge necessary for job success.

Building on ISLLC

One often-expressed concern in principal preparation programs is the lack of a common, cohesive framework that defines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions leaders are expected to possess and apply. A hopeful trend for university program improvement has been the implementation of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards as a useful guide to shape courses and guide practice. Like the No Child Left Behind legislation, the ISLLC standards have created a focused vision to remind universities and principals that the critical indicator of school success is student achievement.

The ISLLC standards have already been adopted for use in nearly 40 states and have begun to provide a powerful stimulus for universities in those states to revise their preparation programs and continuing education activities for school administrators. In addition, a series of performance assessments based on the ISLLC standards are now used for the licensure and professional growth of school principals and superintendents in 13 states.

Selecting Quality Candidates

Another indictment of principal preparation programs is their failure to select qualified applicants for admission. According to one report, “administrators are selected from a talent pool constructed without regard to aptitude for leadership and one that excludes many who may be well suited to serve” (Hess 2003). Universities tend to perpetuate a shallow talent pool by their reliance on traditional selection criteria: grade-point average, letters of recommendation, and interviews. These selection measures have rarely been found helpful in determining future success as educational leaders.

School leaders themselves may inadvertently exacerbate the shortage of qualified candidates when they fail to identify and nurture those who demonstrate strong leadership ability (Quinn 2002). A more proactive approach to improve recruitment is to develop criteria that recognize the high potential of candidates with knowledge of curriculum and instruction, keen work ethic, strong communication skills, and a passion to improve student learning.

Three Model Partnerships

The lack of partnerships between universities and principals compromises the recruitment of the higher-qualified candidates desperately needed to transform low-achieving schools in urban and rural communities. Can such partnerships be created and what form should they take? One option is a shared admissions process that benefits both universities and practitioners by opening university doors to talented teachers who have been recommended by principals for professional advancement. Under this approach, the admissions process includes a comprehensive analysis of the candidate’s professional portfolio and leadership potential.

One such model school-university partnership is a program the University of North Texas and the Dallas Independent School District use to recruit and train future administrators. The district invites principals to nominate talented teachers for admission to the university’s educational leadership programs. District officials and a university admissions team then evaluate the nominated teachers, using several criteria: a record of ongoing professional development; demonstrated knowledge of technology as a tool to improve teaching performance; an increase in student achievement; and experience in working with the entire school community—administrators, parents, teachers, students—to improve the teaching-learning process. Candidates are also required to meet the standard university admission requirements. In this partnership, principals with a track record for high pupil achievement serve as mentors and assist the university in providing reality-based training.

Another promising model of leadership development is offered by Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. The university has created an educational policy and leadership strand in its public administration program. Teachers are selected for admission to the program on recommendations of their principals and participate in a three-year program that emphasizes leadership skills, policy analysis, interpersonal relations, and school reform strategies. Graduates receive a Master of Public Administration degree and fulfill the requirements for a certificate of eligibility for principalship in New Jersey.

A third example of a solid university-school partnership is a program at the University of Buffalo in New York that works with area schools to develop the Leadership Initiative for Tomorrow’s Schools (LIFTS), promoting the involvement of principals and district officials in candidate recruitment and selection. LIFTS also provides fully-trained mentors and paid administrative internships in local schools.

Overhauling the Curriculum

Another way to strengthen principal preparation programs is to completely overhaul outdated university curriculum content. Course work and field-based learning must emphasize
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instructional leadership as the gold standard of good principals, and move away from the traditional emphasis on school management.

Designing new courses that revolve around issues related to student achievement can restore accountability and excellence to preparation programs by integrating an academic and clinical base to the study of leadership. In this integrated plan, prospective leaders might study educational research with the idea of devising specific action steps to apply the research findings to real-world settings. They would obtain necessary field experience by working directly with principals in seeking to resolve perennially thorny issues related to student achievement.

Creating such a problem-based, real-world program of instruction can also encourage universities and principals to seek innovative approaches to the leadership curriculum. For example, principals can assist university faculty in determining which theories and research apply to schools today, and employ this information to resolve school problems. Principals with solid records of leadership can be invited to work with professors to help design course priorities, activities, and measures of performance.

One promising example of such a university-school partnership is the relationship between the University of Oklahoma and the public schools of Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Students in the university educational leadership program work with school improvement committees for a half-day each week for four of the program’s five semesters to discuss real problems and examine possible remedies.

An overhaul of course content is also necessary if training of future school leaders is to be relevant to actual practice. For too long, many principals have employed the “command and control” leadership models they were taught in a previous era. There is growing consensus that these models do not work in today’s school environments, where shared decision-making is validated by research and the practice of enlightened principals. Good leadership taps into the talents and aspirations of teachers, and uses their professionalism to promote student learning (Quinn 2003).

**Reshaping Principal Preparation**

The NCLB grant-funding system represents an ideal opportunity to improve school-university partnerships aimed at reshaping preparation programs. For example, NCLB can fund collaborations between universities and low-achieving schools that address such areas as achievement gaps, high student mobility, teacher shortages, and lack of parent involvement. Funding may be available for tuition reimbursement, professional development, planning activities, and release time for school leaders, prospective leaders, and professors to examine these issues.

NCLB may also provide support in funding university positions for principals with backgrounds in turning around difficult schools. Such new faculty can help universities redesign curriculum that closely integrates theory with professional practice.

Another approach to strengthen principal preparation would be a well-designed program that emphasizes field experience. Under this method of instruction, candidates would spend considerable time shadowing accomplished principals as they work with teachers seeking to adapt classroom practices to diverse student populations. They might also communicate through regular debriefings and seminars with university faculty about application of research and best practices to school-based problems. These should be continuing activities, infused into regular course work throughout one’s training.

Full implementation of the No Child Left Behind law will require bold initiatives to strengthen the leadership skills of principals for today’s schools and those of tomorrow. As field experts in what it takes to lead an effective school, principals are in a unique position to participate in university partnerships. Only through such collaboration can all participants attain the common goal of providing competent instructional leaders, qualified and committed to meet the NCLB mandates.

**References**


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**WEB RESOURCES**


The University of Buffalo describes the Leadership Initiative for Tomorrow’s Schools (LIFTS) mentioned in this article. [www.buffalo.edu/news/fast-execute.cgi/article-page.html?article=5450609](www.buffalo.edu/news/fast-execute.cgi/article-page.html?article=5450609)

The Clearinghouse on Educational Policy Management provides the full text of ERIC Digest 165, “Transforming Principal Preparation.” [http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest165.html](http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest165.html)

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto provides detailed information profiles for principals in five domain areas with extensive bibliographies for each. [www.oise.utoronto.ca/~vsvede](www.oise.utoronto.ca/~vsvede)
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