

Barriers and Gaps: Improving the Preparation of School Leaders in an Era of Accountability

Douglas J. Fiore
Virginia Commonwealth University

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COMMONWEALTH EDUCATIONAL POLICY INSTITUTE
William C. Boshier, Executive Director
Virginia Commonwealth University
Oliver Hall, 1015 W. Main Street
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
Phone: 804/225-3290

The Issue

In preparation for the July 2000, Principals' Leadership Summit, held in Washington DC, organizers posed the following question to conference participants: "What are the major challenges that discourage a person from pursuing the principalship as a career goal?" The ninety principals who responded identified the following five reasons why relatively few people are seeking to become principals:

1. The changing demands of the job, including increased accountability, responsibility for raising students to high standards without adequate support, legal and special education issues, etc.;
2. Salary;
3. Time;
4. Lack of parent and community support and negativity of the media and the public toward schools; and
5. Lack of respect. (Kennedy, 2000)

Similarly, in September 2001, participants at the Virginia State Action for Education Leadership Project (SAELP) Summit made recommendations for removing barriers inherent in the preparation and work of school leaders. Among those recommendations are the following:

1. Analyze role conception of "principal" and break down or broaden administration and leadership into focused positions (i.e. managerial, instructional, testing);
2. The state must increase financial rewards for school leaders...;
3. There should be state supported internship/sabbatical at the local level to encourage people to move into administration and to renew veteran principals;
4. Clarify the role of local school boards to emphasize policy development;
5. Elevate in the public perception the critical role of educational leaders.

Gaps in Preparation and Barriers to Performance

While reports such as these illuminate the challenges of the principalship and the trepidation some educators have about serving as principals, the issue is compounded by barriers in rules and regulations and by gaps in the preparation and training that leaders receive. Back in 1987, the National Commission for the Advancement of Excellence in Educational Administration identified gaps in the preparation of school leaders and barriers to their performance while calling for large-scale reform in the preparation and development of our nation's school leaders. To date, many of the Commission's recommendations have been ignored, resulting in school leadership preparation and performance gaps that are harming America's schools. Three Commission recommendations are still being discussed in today's environment, as follows:

1. The public schools should become full partners in the preparation of school administrators.
2. Licensure programs should be substantially reformed.
3. Professional development activities should be an integral component of the careers of professors and practicing administrators.

Also significant in today's environment are the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. These standards, developed under the auspices of the

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 1994, form the basis for preparation and licensure in 32 states, with the list of participating states on the rise. The ISLLC Standards state:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:

1. facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community;
2. advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
3. ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
4. collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;
5. acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and
6. understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

These Standards are further explained through lists of the knowledge, dispositions, and performance indicators that aid those preparing and assessing school leaders.

In 2001, the Southern Regional Education Board identified six strategies for attracting strong leaders to our nation's schools, including the following:

1. Tap high-performers with demonstrated knowledge of curriculum and instruction and with a passion for getting students to meet high-achievement standards. In making this suggestion, the SREB encourages collaboration between universities and districts.
2. Create a two-tiered licensure system with the classifications of initial licensure and professional licensure.
3. Create state leadership academies that focus on teams from low-performing schools and on continuous and comprehensive school reform.

There is a clear and obvious linkage between the gaps identified in 1987, the ISLLC Standards, and the present day recommendations for attracting strong leaders. To best suggest how these gaps can be filled and barriers overcome, it is prudent to examine policies and procedures that some states have implemented, such as the following:

- ◆ The Kentucky Leadership Academy provides training and development for school leaders using public school administrators and university faculty members as trainers.
- ◆ Since 1990, Kentucky has issued principal's licenses following a two-tiered model (initial and professional).
- ◆ The North Carolina General Assembly funds the Principal Fellows Program. This program was established to ensure that the best, most highly-qualified students are able to earn the Master's of School Administration (MSA) degree in two years on a full-time basis and to provide a cadre of well-trained administrative candidates to all North Carolina public school systems.

- ◆ Also in North Carolina, the Principals' Executive Program helps fulfill North Carolina's need for strong school leadership by providing relevant and rigorous professional development to practicing or on-the-job public school administrators.
- ◆ The Ohio Principals Leadership Academy, launched in 1999, is a partnership among Ohio's leaders in government, education, and business. The academy's curriculum is based on the ISLLC Standards and provides mentorship and training opportunities to all Ohio principals.
- ◆ In Fairfax County, Virginia, leadership academy seminars provide opportunities for educational and support administrators to develop and refine leadership skills as well as update knowledge in curriculum areas and instructional strategies.

The Picture in Virginia

Virginia is one of the 32 states using the ISLLC Standards as the framework for administrator preparation and endorsement programs. It is not clear, however, if the particular knowledge, dispositions, and performances of these standards form the bases for the coursework that makes up preparation and endorsement programs in Virginia's 15 approved programs. Furthermore, it is also clear from examining the Commonwealth of Virginia's *Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers, Administrators, and Superintendents* (Adopted by VA BOE, 2000) that school principals may be subject to evaluations based on criteria not necessarily included as components in the approved program from which they have graduated. Below is a list of sample performance indicators that are presented in the Virginia Board of Education's *Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers, Administrators, and Superintendents*.

The administrator:

- ◆ applies and communicates statistical findings;
- ◆ assists with the development of a comprehensive curriculum utilizing goals and objectives in alignment with the Standards of Learning;
- ◆ establishes and implements formal and informal induction procedures to promote assistance for and acceptance of new employees;
- ◆ keeps staff informed about status of budget requests, equipment purchases, and materials ordered;
- ◆ seeks grants and community resources to support school goals;
- ◆ models and promotes multicultural awareness, gender sensitivity, and the appreciation of diversity in the school-community;
- ◆ maintains a professional demeanor and appearance appropriate to responsibilities;
- ◆ shares ideas and information and considers the interests and needs of other administrators and community stakeholders in promoting and supporting district goals and services;
- ◆ serves on division, state, and/or national committees and maintains an active role in professional organizations.

In examining this list, it is apparent that a candidate could meet all certification requirements in the Commonwealth of Virginia, including completion of an approved administration and supervision program without having been exposed to and/or assessed in all of these performance indicators.

Further describing the situation in the Commonwealth of Virginia urges reflection on the present requirement that educational administration preparation programs are based on the ISLLC Standards. While this is cogent, there is presently no requirement that graduates of these programs are assessed on the ISLLC Standards. If the presently tabled idea of requiring the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) comes to fruition, it will be an important step toward correcting this, as that particular assessment is based on the knowledge, dispositions, and performances of the ISLLC Standards.

Barriers Inherent in Organizational Cultures

Oftentimes, legend supersedes reality and individuals accept the existence of a rule or regulation when, in fact, no such rule or regulation can be documented. As such, barriers to instructional leadership exist within the minds of school administrators that have no basis in truth. As Deal and Peterson (1999) explain, “Beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life in schools, there is a stream of thought and activity. This underground flow of feelings and folkways wends its way within schools, dragging people, programs, and ideas toward often-unstated purposes” (p. 3).

Specifically, there are beliefs among Virginia institutions that a specific series of courses is required for administrator preparation. In fact, the required competencies are far more flexible than some professors and program directors realize. There is also great misunderstanding among higher education institutions as to what constitutes an acceptable internship experience. There are misunderstandings among school administrators about such topics as funding, special education, staffing, and personnel.

These misconceptions, or cultural inaccuracies, can only be cleared up through careful, deliberate communication. To this effect, the State Board of Education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia should consider requiring seminars and policy briefings to dispel myth and reinforce actual rules and regulations.

Proposed Solutions

Borrowing from the actions taken in other states, the Commonwealth of Virginia would benefit from greater cooperation between local school divisions, institutions that prepare school leaders, the business community, and the Department of Education. It is incumbent upon all three parties to articulate the expectations for school leaders and to ensure that these expectations are integrated into the training and future development that school leaders receive. Additionally, consideration should be given to the following suggestions:

1. The formation of a Leadership Academy would be a helpful first step. Like those in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio, such an academy can be set up to support the ongoing professional development of practicing school administrators. With the support of the State Board of Education, the academy could be jointly hosted by an institution of higher education or, preferably, by several institutions working together. Nontraditional providers of leadership preparation can be included as can professional

organizations like the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals (VAESP) and the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals (VASSP).

2. A strong evaluation component aimed at assisting schools in conducting meaningful assessments of progress can be an important component of professional development sessions, whether through a Leadership Academy or through other state sponsored means.
3. Additionally, the Commonwealth would benefit from carefully designed professional development opportunities for in-service school administrators which focus on the ISLLC Standards and the changing nature of the principalship. These opportunities can be provided under the auspices of a Leadership Academy or through electronic means. The *Leadership for Reform Series*, created through CEPI under the direction of Dr. Bill Bosher, is an example.
4. Also, serious dialogue must take place in the Commonwealth to address the perceptions of administrative demands, the accountability of school administrators, and the compensation that administrators receive. Policies relative to the hiring and firing authority of principals and increased compensation as accountability pressure mount are two areas for which development is needed.
5. The State Board of Education and the General Assembly can assist in working toward the continued improvement of public perception regarding school administrators. Ideas for accomplishing this can be generated in conjunction with concerned professional organizations. Examples are: the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals (VAESP); the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals (VASSP); the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS); the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA); the Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD); the Virginia Parent Teacher Association (VPTA); and the Virginia Education Association (VEA).
6. The General Assembly could direct the State Board of Education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia to conduct comprehensive evaluations of the 15 programs currently preparing school leaders through institutions of higher education. Inferior programs, particularly those not adhering to the ISLLC Standards and without courses or modules that are based on the contemporary work requirements of school leaders, could be phased out as a result of these evaluations.
7. Regardless of the evaluations suggested above, all institutions of higher education that prepare school leaders should work cooperatively to develop guidelines for internship experiences that are meaningful to pre-service candidates as well as to the in-service administrators with which they interface in the schools.
8. Recent graduates of Virginia School Leadership Preparation Programs should be surveyed to ascertain the gaps they perceive to have existed in their training.

9. Institutions of Higher Education that prepare school leaders can be held accountable by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia for working cooperatively with school divisions in preparing school leaders. This requirement can be best manifested in the internship experience that is already a part of preparation programs.
10. Continuing a cooperative relationship, preparation programs can partner with school divisions to design mentoring programs and/or a volunteer corps of “master leaders” that principals can contact with leadership questions. Retired school administrators and teacher leaders can be tapped for this service.
11. Though not immediately feasible, the General Assembly should consider increasing the financial compensation of school principals and examining the staffing requirements for administrators, particularly in areas experiencing student growth.
12. The School Leaders Licensure Assessment should be required of all graduates before they can receive a certificate to work as a school administrator.
13. The Virginia Department of Education should consider a two-tier system of licensure much like the one in Kentucky. Roughly defined, the two phases of licensure can address the issues of competence and readiness.
14. Through cooperation between various agencies, Virginia should create a “model curriculum” for the preparation of school leaders. This would provide a framework against which all preparation programs can be compared.

Concluding Remark

While the above suggestions deserve strong consideration based on the current situation in the Commonwealth of Virginia, it is prudent to remember that policy makers in Virginia have, thus far, done an admirable job in supporting leadership in K-12 schools. The Standards of Learning and Standards of Quality further exemplify the support that policy makers in the Commonwealth have given schools to reach and teach all children.

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