



4-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Wasden, Del and Thomas, Gloria Jean (1989) "Preparing Principals: New Directions," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 16: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1592>

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The time for traditional, mechanical administrator training programs has long since run its course.

Preparing Principals: New Directions

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Preparing Principals: New Directions

Long before the release of *Leaders for America's Schools, the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration*, most professionals involved in preparing administrators for public schools knew the wind was changing. In conferences across the country, attendees were repeatedly informed about the growing discontent of school administrators and the low evaluations principals gave their own administrative preparation programs. In one such cathartic session, listeners heard the depressing news that many practicing principals found little relevance between their training and the practice of administration. In a report from the National Center for Educational Information, only 25 percent of principals rated their pre-service preparation as excellent (Feistritzer, 1988).

Leaving aside discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of the Commission report, some of their recommendations bear directly on the subject of preparing principals. The Commission asked that "intellectually superior and capable individuals" be selected as potential administrators and that training programs provide more realistic internships patterned after those of "other professional schools" (NCEE, 1987). The importance of these recommendations is magnified when the ages and projected retirement of current principals is taken into consideration. If reports are ac-

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curate, within the next five years over 21 percent of principals presently serving will leave their positions (Feistritzer, 1988). How will those positions be filled with "superior and capable individuals?"

The solution should be found in administrator preparation programs that select the best potential administrators for training and then provide, even require, extensive internship experience to balance a research-based curriculum. Unfortunately, too many university-based preparation programs merely allow self-selection of aspiring administrators by requiring minimal entrance requirements into programs and courses. Many university programs are so tradition bound to a sequential progression through numbers of courses and credits and to evidence of knowledge based on test and essay scores that internships become merely another credit-hour duty to be checked off. Still other school administrator training programs have implemented internship or practicum requirements, but the number of hours and quality of experience are not adequate to prepare the novice principal to walk into a school and become its educational leader.

An administrative internship must be more than a haphazardly arranged time for a student in a university graduate program to poke around a principal's office for a few hours each week, watching the principal at work, taking notes, performing a few mundane administrative tasks, asking the principal questions, and reporting back to the university at the conclusion that the internship requirement has been completed. In Daresh's (1987) study of the beginning principal, the respondents' most common observation was that they did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they assumed the position. This finding should cause training institutions to ask sobering questions about their approach to the preparation of principals. While the new principal would not be expected to be prepared for every eventuality, surely major responsibilities and tasks should not come as such a surprise to the novice administrator that they propel him or her into a stupor of thought. How can administrator preparation programs better prepare administrators for their first positions? What kind of selection process for future administrators is needed? What kind of internship should be required? How can the internship and class experience be balanced? How can universities and public schools cooperate to develop new directions for the preparation of future educational leaders?

Six interrelated factors determine the efficacy of the preparation of future school administrators:

- 1) selection process
- 2) internship
- 3) mentor principal
- 4) curriculum
- 5) cohort group
- 6) partnership between universities and school districts

Selection Process

The state of New Jersey recently removed prior teaching experience as a requirement for an administrative credential (Guthrie, 1988). State education officials hoped that this deletion would greatly expand the pool of available candidates for the principalship. Of course a larger pool of candidates will be created through the deletion of any current standard. Requiring no university degree at all would likely create a sea of new applicants. A larger applicant pool, however, is not the answer to the dilemma of poor candidates for the principalship. Preparing a pool of better trained, better *qualified* candidates for principalships is the answer. Such a pool can be created only through the careful selection and

preparation of those identified as potential leaders. Identifying, encouraging, and providing financial support for experienced educators with demonstrated leadership ability and educational insight so that they may be trained in a quality administrator preparation program will accomplish far more toward improving the principalship than fishing in a bigger pond. The processes used in selecting and training administrators have failed us, not the quality or number of potential leaders currently in service in the nation's schools.

Even among the critics of the so-called overburden in school administration, there seems to be agreement that the single most important professional in education is the building principal (Raspberry, 1988). It is the principal who sets the school climate and influences the teamwork and morale of the faculty, thereby affecting the attitude and achievement of students. First-rate schools have first-rate principals. These exceptional principals should serve as models and mentors for aspiring principals.

Most colleges and departments of education do little, if any, screening of students prior to their enrollment in graduate programs in administration. Minimal grade point averages and graduate examination test scores allow admittance to traditional programs, and those students who have decided to pursue their administrative credentials move through the required courses at their own pace. In some states, administrative certification requires only completion of specific courses, and no admittance criteria are imposed because no graduate degree is needed. University departments offer courses semester after semester to students who seek administrative positions because they desire more money or status, are "burned out" with classroom teaching, or desire a change of job duties. The graduates of such programs typically self select the area of administration, complete the requirements, and then enter the pool of applicants. Very few are selected as promising prospective principals through a collaborative process including university faculty, practicing principals, and superintendents willing to provide supportive training opportunities for future educational leaders in the schools. If the selection of future leaders is, as Goodlad (1984) says, a superintendent's "first order of business," then the selection process should be the priority of educational planners and leaders in both university educational preparation programs and school districts.

The best potential administrators should be identified and encouraged to seek the training and experience needed to qualify for administrative positions. Admittance processes to such training programs should be so fine-tuned that those who are selected and complete the training provide a pool of exceptionally prepared candidates from which future leaders are selected. Besides traditional indicators, such as grade point averages and examination scores (which should be higher than the minimal scores generally required), selection criteria should include several years of outstanding teaching experience, demonstrated writing and verbal skills, group interaction abilities, and leadership potential. If seriously considered and implemented, two procedures would immediately begin to correct the effects of the present "luck of the draw" system of selecting principals: first, the use of district data, including peer recognition, to identify and promote employees with leadership ability; second, a financial investment by the district, an investment which would pay enormous dividends in the future, to help underwrite superb training for exceptional educators. Leaving the leadership of schools to chance selection by the candidates themselves bypasses an unidentified—perhaps dormant—critical mass of po-

tential leadership, leadership desperately needed in the schools.

Internship

School Setting. Internship hours for traditional programs often may be fulfilled at the school where the part-time graduate student is a full-time teacher. Even when the internship is carried out at a different site, the student is often left to make all the arrangements at the on-site school and therefore schedules intern time at convenient or comfortable locations rather than at sites where good administrative experience can best be acquired. The university often has no control over or interest in where students do their internships. Having quasi-administrative experience in one's own school, at a school adjacent to the university, at a school where the principal merely wants an unpaid assistant principal, or at a school where the intern is accepted if he or she stays out of the way simply does not get the job done. Such hollow experiences do not compare with an intensive assignment in an effective school under the direction of a committed, caring educational leader, a mentor principal.

The greater the variety of leadership styles and procedures an intern can experience, the more prepared he or she will be to resolve the multitude of problems that challenge a school principal. The internship will be most beneficial if completed at a school recognized as innovative and effective, where the principal is the acknowledged leader in instructional matters and resource management. Extensive experience at one or more school settings should be part of the internship. Ideally, the future administrator should have internship experience at both elementary and secondary levels and in more than one district. The future administrator will be best prepared by participating in administrative activities in several settings, and the education profession will benefit from having a pool of potential administrators who have had varied training experiences.

Internship Activities. Internship or practicum or field experience is a hazy concept in many administrative training programs. The student goes into a school to shadow a principal, to be assigned a few routine tasks, or to observe administrative procedures, and internship requirements are thus fulfilled. Universities may provide checklists of tasks to be completed (i.e., attend a district principal meeting, conduct a faculty meeting, write a building policy, etc.) and as soon as everything is checked off, the internship is completed and the student is supposedly prepared to be a professional administrator.

The myriad of administrative tasks and responsibilities is difficult to categorize for checklists. After basing a study on observations of principals throughout the school day, Peterson (1981) compares the day-to-day working conditions of elementary school principals with the idealized role prevalent in the field. The results indicate that the tasks performed by the principal are characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. A principal may perform as many as 50 separate tasks an hour, 85 percent of which are under nine minutes in duration. Such a barrage of rapid decision making requires an extraordinary ability to gather and assess information. Establishing the school climate, providing instructional leadership, and developing good school/community relations are among the expectations of effective school administrators that cannot easily be completed in a few hours by a part-time intern. During the internship, the student should be expected to apply the theories studied in university courses as well as to evaluate and even to conduct new research. Instead of a checklist of activities

completed, the student who has full-time field experience has had legitimate experience as an educational leader at the conclusion of the internship.

Time Commitment. Many administrative internships require only a limited number of hours in a school setting, and the number of hours is often based on credits (i.e., 50 hours of internship earn one semester hour of credit). Students who spend a few hours each week or a couple of hours each day in a school during a semester or quarter fail to participate even minimally in all aspects of a principalship. When students are able to fulfill internship requirements by meeting with a principal after school hours or by sandwiching internship time in between university courses or regular classroom duties, they are unable to learn what the position entails except through second-hand discussion or observation.

Internships must be long enough and continuous enough to allow aspiring administrators to experience all aspects of a principal's job and even to participate in as many duties and activities as possible under the tutelage of an experienced principal. An aspiring administrator should spend a full year in school administrative offices observing and performing the intangible as well as the specific responsibilities of school leadership, including those unquantifiable duties that change every day throughout the year. A preparation program that provides full-time internship experience for an entire school year ensures that a new administrator is prepared to provide immediate leadership in a school as well as to handle the day-to-day duties of school management. Full-time internships for a year provide aspiring administrators with as many as 1,500 hours of school experience in addition to the breadth and depth of experience required to be a professional school administrator.

Mentor Principal. Too many traditional internships are arranged at the school where the intern is assigned as a teacher and under the supervision of his or her own principal. Whatever strong or weak leadership behavior and administrative abilities are practiced by the principal are observed and incorporated by the intern who has no basis for comparison. When the student is responsible for arranging his or her own internship wherever a principal is willing to assume supervisory responsibility, little is done to ensure that the experience will benefit the intern. Even good principals sometimes are not good mentors or supervisors for future administrators, and internships under poor supervision merely perpetuate leadership problems detrimental to progress in education.

Mentor principals should be carefully selected to work with aspiring administrators on the basis of their proven leadership abilities, administrative skills, and interest in helping educational leaders of the future. Their schools should radiate a climate where teachers, students, parents, and community work together to provide for educational achievement. Under the caring and competent tutelage of such principals, the intern should emerge from the practicum knowing firsthand what an educational leader is and how to be one. Mentor principals should not merely tolerate intern principals but be enthusiastic about working with them, be interested in refining their own mentoring skills, and be committed to collaborating with university personnel as a full partner in a people-building enterprise.

Cohort Group. A persistent problem in educational administration has been the "loose coupling" (Blake and Mouton, 1974) of school organizations, resulting in principals functioning independently, seldom building strong professional relationships. First-year principals have gone into their new positions often feeling isolated, with no one to

turn to for advice or assistance. With no professional network to provide natural lines of communication among principals, collegial relationships that benefit school administrators do not develop.

When prospective principals progress through a training program as a cohort group, collegial relationships develop. Learning is most effective when students with similar goals work together, sharing experiences. Cohorts utilize the principle of cooperation and team building, traits so necessary in this age, rather than the isolation of competitive behavior. The complex nature of the principalship necessitates the development of participatory problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interns who work as a cohort group have opportunities to analyze and reflect upon their academic and internship experiences with each other, with mentor principals, and with university faculty. The interns create a support structure, a professional network, that will continue when they assume positions of leadership in education.

Curriculum. Although traditional university courses transmit important information, theory, and investigation skills, they are typically far too limited in scope and much too regimented in delivery for students to make important transfers and generalizations to their future principalship experiences. Lectures with a few in-basket exercises or case studies provide insufficient opportunity to discuss field relevance based upon intern experience or to reflect meaningfully upon current field experience. Content of the curriculum should run concurrent with field experience in an articulated program of theory, skills, and practice. Then university faculty and mentor principals have the opportunity to teach modules in their areas of expertise. When courses are delivered in modules, faculty, and guest lecturers are able to coordinate their presentation of concepts with the increasing level of responsibility and experience in the internship. Modular presentations allow the utilization of resources not usually tapped in regular programs.

The use of materials which bridge theory and practice in meaningful ways should be encouraged. Scenarios and simulations may be introduced to help the learner make transitions from information to application. Designing modular curricula requires careful attention to content, sequence, and consistency. Haphazard curricular offerings which are not correlated with the internship provide fewer advantages for learning.

Future administrators must be better prepared in all aspects of research; designing, conducting, evaluating, and interpreting research should be seen as central to the curriculum of aspiring principals. Too much precious time is spent in studying and implementing reforms already discounted by educational researchers. Research literacy will help prevent school administrators from being overrun by wave after wave of specious reforms.

Such extensive curricular reforms require substantial professional commitment from universities and school districts if they are to create a more efficacious training program. Such a program has the potential to stimulate renewal in all who become involved in it—mentors, interns, professors, and specialists.

Partnership Between Universities and School Districts. A partnership between the university and the school districts creates the ideal learning environment for aspiring administrators. When training program goals and processes are determined by university faculty and school district personnel collaborating to determine how best to meet the needs of school districts, practicum experience and classroom work mesh to provide the student with a complete education. The university and school districts should

be mutually involved in the partnership through arranging internships, providing in-service renewal for mentor principals, selecting future administrators for admittance to programs, and advising and evaluating interns. A partnership requires a type of close collaboration between universities and school districts that is not commonly found.

Summary

Organizations or institutions that are designed and operated as if they were machines are called bureaucracies. Most organizations are bureaucratized to some degree, and the mechanistic mode of thought has shaped our conceptions of organizations with their state of orderly relations between clearly defined parts that have some determinate order. In short, organizations which operate as machines foster mechanical relations and can be expected to function in routinized, efficient, reliable, and predictable ways (Morgan, 1986). This is a fair representation of the traditional, never-changing nature of many administrator preparation programs. Such a perception will not serve us well now or in the future.

The time for traditional, mechanical administrator training programs has long since run its course. The pressing need for many new competent principals is too imminent, the challenges facing school administrators are too complex, and the competencies needed for success as educational leaders are too numerous. Only collaborative administrator preparation programs that incorporate selective admittance criteria, extensive internship experience under the guidance of competent mentor principals, and a thoughtfully organized curriculum will provide the type of educational leader demanded by today's schools. Only then will it be possible for education to select new administra-

tors who are fully qualified to be effective instructional leaders and efficient resource managers for America's public schools.

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