

# ADMINISTRATIVE INTERNSHIPS: CONSIDERING PRINCIPALS' VOICES FROM THE FIELD\*

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, educational administration programs have come under increased national scrutiny as their effectiveness in preparing highly effective school leaders has been questioned (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Levine, 2005). Those questioning the efficacy of leadership preparation programs are expecting educational administration professors to ensure that their graduates, many of whom are entering administration with minimal years of teaching experience, are well prepared to assume sophisticated leadership positions.

This attention is well warranted. As scrutiny of educational leadership programs grows, so does the recognition that well prepared principals are a vital element in school and student success. In fact, research data are confirming the link between effective principal leadership and both school improvement and increased student achievement (Davis, et al., 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Schmoker,

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2001; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Although educational leadership preparation encompasses many facets, one area of particular focus in Illinois is the administrative internship. Various professional, governmental, and state-supported organizations such as the Commission on School Leader Preparation, Illinois Council of Professors of Educational Leadership, and the Wallace Foundation have focused a great deal of attention on the internship experience. In fact, the Illinois General Assembly recently received a report from the Illinois School Leader Task Force (2008) which contained recommendations to improve the quality of school leadership programs, especially the administrative internship. For many, the internship experience is viewed as a vital component of school-level leadership preparation because it is during the internship that aspiring administrators begin to connect theory with practice.

Although a variety of Illinois educational, business, and political leaders continue to weigh in on the leadership preparation debate and particularly the role of the internship experience, the voices of many public school principals have not been widely heard. These practicing school-level leaders, most of whom have participated in administrative internships during their administrative preparation programs, may be able to provide valuable insights into not only into what types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions are essential to effective administrative internship programs, but also recommendations to improve them.

## 2 Improving Administrative Leadership Programs

The sense of urgency to accelerate the redesign of principal preparation programs is growing as principal accountability has escalated, particularly related to school improvement (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Brown, 2006). This suggests that aspiring principals must have both theoretical and authentic experiences in curriculum, instruction, and assessment that address student achievement if they are to be truly effective leaders.

The Southern Regional Education Board (2005) (SREB) has identified several related essential competencies for principals which include:

- a comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement;
- the ability to work with teachers and others to design and implement a system for continuous student achievement; and
- the ability to provide the necessary support for staff for sound school curriculum development and instructional practices (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005, p.12).

These competencies point to the principal as instructional leader and are grounded in research which shows that principals contribute a measurable amount of influence on school effectiveness and improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), administrative leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student achievement.

Principal responsibilities in the area of school improvement have been well documented. In their quantitative synthesis of the research, the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) identified 21 categories of principal behaviors that are correlated to student achievement. Among the 21 principal responsibilities were willingness to challenge the status quo as a change agent, establishment of effective communication with and among teachers and students, development of clear goals, demonstration of flexibility to meet the needs of the situation, and direct involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Marzano, et. al 2005).

The need to align educational administration course curriculum and program requirements with principal responsibilities must focus on not only traditional coursework but also the administrative internship, often the culminating experience prior to obtaining a principalship. Universities need to ensure that theory is clearly aligned with practice through the internship to allow students to demonstrate their skills in these areas.

Recently, the internship experience has come under scrutiny as the examination of administrative preparation programs has heightened in response to concerns raised about the quality of school leader preparation (Levine, 2005). Calls for improvement of meaningful clinical experiences have challenged educational administration professors to evaluate current practices and restructure internship components (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006). Most often these improvement recommendations have focused on curricular coherence, rigor, pedagogy, and the blend of course work with “on the job” training obtained through field experiences, primarily during the principal internship (Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Southern Regional Education Board, 2005).

In addition, the Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities in their report, *School Leader Preparation: A Blueprint for Change* (2006), recommended several areas for inclusion in internship requirements. These were:

- extending the internship experience to a year;
- requiring that the internship be a degree requirement with candidates allowed to begin their internship after passing the state certification exam;
- creating university-school partnerships to improve field experiences;
- providing mentor training at the university level;
- employing clinical faculty at the university level to supervise interns and assess their field performance relative to the goals of the preparation program;
- finding internship funding sources;
- designing key best practice internship assessments; and,
- revising the ISLLC-based Illinois Standards for School Leaders so that field experience requirements and evaluations, as well as internship requirements, are consistent with Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards. (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006).

Furthermore, the Illinois Council of Professors of Educational Administration (ICPEA) has noted that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) program approval requirements include internship standards that can provide guidance in re-designing administrative internship programs (Illinois Council of Professors of Educational Administration, 2007).

Similarly, the Southern Regional Education Board supported by the Wallace Foundation has identified “core conditions of redesign” that point to the internship component of school leadership programs. The conditions included:

1. University/district partnerships for principal preparation;
2. Emphasis on knowledge and skills for improving schools and raising student achievement;
3. Well-planned and supported field experiences; and,
4. Rigorous evaluation of participants’ mastery of essential competencies and program quality and effectiveness (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2006).

The SREB also noted that field experiences and internships “add value” to principal preparation and play a significant role in integrating all course work to meaningful applications in school settings. A cohesive collaboration of the internship with school-based mentors is typically a critical component in internship redesign efforts.

States such as Illinois are responding to these recommendations by developing guidelines to assist departments of educational administration in their re-design efforts. In addition, they are expanding the state’s role to hold universities more accountable for substantive administrative preparation programmatic changes. In Illinois, this is defined as requiring universities to resubmit for program approval to state boards of higher education, and also increasing principal licensure requirements (Illinois School Leader Task Force, 2008).

Recently, in its report to the Illinois General Assembly, the Illinois School Leader Task Force (2008) suggested several additional recommendations to improve the quality of school leadership programs. Among these was a charge to “create meaningful clinical and internship experiences” that support the recommendations made in the *School Leader Preparation: A Blueprint for Change* (2006).

As calls for universities to appraise the quality of their school leader preparation programs, including the internship experience, grow, an important element of any program review process is consideration of various stakeholders' views. Those who have both participated in administrative internships and are now school leaders can provide valuable insights to professors of educational administration who are responsible for ensuring that their school leader preparation programs prepare highly effective leaders.

### 3 Problems and Purposes

As demands to increase the efficacy of educational leadership preparation programs, including the administrative internship continue, and political, governmental, and educational leaders debate how best to accomplish this, school administrators need to be included more directly in the discussion. Since school-level leaders play such a pivotal role in improving schools and increasing student achievement, their suggestions on ways to improve educational leadership internship programs will help to inform the debate.

This study, which was part of a broader study, focused on Illinois principals' recommendations for improving the quality of administrative internships programs. Specifically, principals were asked to identify what experiences should be included in the internship. In addition, they were asked to offer advice to educational administration professors on how improve internship programs.

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Context

In Illinois, 2,074,167 students are served in 868 school districts configured as K-8 elementary, 9-12 high school, or K-12 unit school districts in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Minority students make up 46.0% of the public school K-12 population (Ruiz & Koch, 2009). Principals can earn their state-approved administrative certification at any of thirty-two Illinois public and private universities (Illinois State Board of Education, 2008).

### 4.2 Participants

The target population for this study was experienced Illinois principals. A web-based survey was emailed to 3,483 Illinois public principals whose email addresses were available from the Illinois State Board of Education. Six hundred and fifty-one principals responded, resulting in an 18.69% response rate. The actual response rate was could have been higher. Limiting factors to the response rate may have been school districts blocking email accounts and invalid email addresses. Also, since the survey was administered during the summer, some principals were no longer employed in their positions due to job changes and retirements. Respondents included 22.2% from rural, 48.7% from suburban, and 29.1% from urban school districts.

### 4.3 Questionnaire

For the broader study, a three-part questionnaire was developed and tested with a panel of education administration professors, all of whom had experience as school administrators. This study reports the results of the third section of the survey only. After the instrument and procedures were modified, the questionnaire was approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

The third section of the survey which focused on improving administrative internship programs asked principal to respond to two open-ended questions:

- What experiences should be included in an administrative internship program to adequately prepare administrative interns for their first administrative position?
- What advice would you have offer professors of education administration to improve administrative internship programs?

#### 4.4 Data Collection

This study, which was completed during July and August, 2008, utilized a modified Dillman (2007) web-based survey method for data collection. The Dillman (2007) method includes personalizing contacts, utilizing multiple contacts, simplifying communication and survey collection features, and monitoring responses closely. Since the researchers only had direct access to a single, comprehensive statewide list of principal email addresses, only a single, not multiple, contact method was employed. Principals were emailed a cover letter which included contact information for the researchers and a link to the web-based survey. Two additional follow-up emails were sent to all principals to encourage survey completion.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

All principal responses to the two open-ended questions were recorded verbatim. Data were analyzed to identify any trends that might appear within the categories (Maxwell, 1996). Through an inductive analysis (McMillan & Wergin, 2006), “data are gathered first and synthesized inductively for understanding. Conclusions are grounded from the bottom up” (p.94).

Open-ended qualitative responses were analyzed through data reduction, display, conclusion creation, and triangulation to identify trends (Berkowitz, 1997). Two of the researchers independently completed data reduction, display, and triangulation to develop conclusions. They shared their data-identified themes with each other following this process. Though this does not guarantee reliability and validity, it does provide “dependable results” (Guba & Lincoln 1981, p. 146) that can be replicated and retested to increase reliability and validity (Merriam, 1988).

#### 4.6 Organizing Framework

Educational leadership programs widely subscribe to Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards to guide the quality and assessment of their offerings. Programs often employ these standards as lenses through which to gauge candidate performance, identify areas of improvement, and introduce reasonable curricular changes. The researchers selected ELCC standards to serve as an organizing framework to categorize participants’ qualitative responses to two open-ended questions. Results for the first question are categorized under appropriate ELCC standards. Multiple paraphrased responses to the first question are listed in descending order from most to least often mentioned. Multiple responses to the second question are also listed in descending order from most to least often mentioned.

### 5 Results

The first open-ended question asked principals to identify experiences which should be included in an administrative internship program to adequately prepare administrative interns for their first administrative position. Results of the first question are categorized under appropriate ELCC standard.

*Standard 1. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school vision of learning supported by the school community.* Respondents afforded value to internship experiences that were authentic, had consequences, and dealt with the complexity of learning. Three sets of responses spoke to this standard’s emphasis on how a vision of learning can become more focused through the following activities. Interns should:

- Be given opportunities to actually observe, supervise, and evaluate teaching;
- Lead specific long term school-based projects or participate on School Improvement Planning teams; and,
- Examine problem-solving case studies related to development of a school’s vision of learning.

*Standard 2. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective*

*instructional program, applying best practice to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.* Respondents suggested that interns contribute to real curricular planning in the following ways. Interns should be:

- Positioned to lead authentic professional development responsibilities and curriculum planning activities for and with faculty;
- Required to conduct “curriculum work,” as one participant labeled it, dedicated to special education, Response to Intervention (RTI), and 504-plan development; and,
- Expected to create curriculum change plans based upon the analysis of student assessment data.

*Standard 3. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.* Standard 3 speaks to a wide range of administrative responsibilities needed to sustain an effective learning environment. Respondents’ recommendations reflected this range and suggested the following. Interns should:

- Be placed in situations where finance and budgeting skills need to be applied;
- Be expected to handle actual discipline issues and authentically engage in all level of disciplinary processes;
- Work directly with individual parents or parent groups to understand how administrators build support and communicate most effectively;
- Learn how to develop class schedules;
- Should be required to “shadow” principals who are engaged in the hiring process;
- Should “shadow” principals as they fulfill daily responsibilities;
- Be expected to deal with actual personnel problems and learn how to work through employee complaints; and,
- Should direct “nuts and bolts” activities such as bus duty, the cafeteria, or after school programming.

*Standard 4. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.* Although the range of recommendations for engaging parental or community stakeholders was somewhat limited, respondents offered one general and one pointed suggestion for interns. Interns should:

- Learn how to work most effectively with parent organizations; and,
- Be required to develop their written personal communication skills particularly related to communicating with parents, staff members, and community stakeholders.

*Standard 5. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner.* Interestingly, no respondents explicitly mentioned activities related to the ethics of “care,” “fairness,” or “integrity.”

*Standard 6. Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.* Similar to Standard 5, none explicitly suggested internship-based activities within larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural frames.

The second question asked principals to offer advice to professors of educational administration about how to improve administrative internship programs. Many of the recommendations spoke to the improving general rhythms of the internships; significant numbers of specific recommendations were also offered. Summarized below are the most frequently mentioned recommendations. Each of these responses speaks to ELCC Standard 7 that emphasizes how interns should apply knowledge learned during formal stages of their preparation preceding the internship. Principals said that internships should include:

- Experiences which are highly practical, hands-on, and “personally meaningful to the candidate”;
- Those which represent the “real world of administration,” such as practical skill development within meaningful decision-making and problem solving opportunities;
- More emphasis on less academic “nuts and bolts” tasks and less on “logging hours, portfolio construction, and paper writing”;
- Higher standards for actual leadership and management experiences not just simply observing administrative tasks;
- Substantial collaborative planning between the university professor and the onsite supervisor to ensure that interns have standards-based activities with “more rigorous expectations”; and,
- “Honest feedback” rather than generic feedback from both the university and onsite supervisor throughout the experience.

## 6 Discussion

Given this set of responses, principals seemingly support specific internship activities that align with and reflect ELCC guidelines. Principals voiced concerns about the types, depths, assessment, and meaningfulness of specific internship activities. Principals called for interns to be more immersed in highly-structured, standards-based, authentic learning opportunities that place the onus of responsibility for performance upon the intern. Furthermore, they noted that these opportunities should be collaboratively fashioned by the intern, supervisor, and well-informed professor of educational administration who has established a presence within the school setting. Lastly, it seems this triad should, at the very least, be in regular contact so formative performance-based assessments and candidate reflections may be reviewed and adjusted if needed.

The authors also found it interesting that the first synthesized response under Standard 3 recommended that interns be given additional exposure to fiscal and budget management activities. Two of the authors, both veterans administrators, wondered why respondents placed such emphasis on budgeting since from their personal experiences, principals did not devote a substantial portion of their time dealing with school finance. Conversely, the authors found it interesting that explicit recommendations regarding the ethics of integrity and fairness (Standard 5) as well as framing administrative and educational decisions within larger frameworks (Standard 6) were absent. Granted, each response about internship activities related to Standards 1 – 4 may have inherently incorporated an ethical and broader intellectual thought. Moreover, one could assume that ethical mindedness would inform how interns communicated and collaborated with parents and created a culture of learning for students. But based on the collective silence around Standards 5 and 6, and what they represent, respondents seemingly emphasized that interns should be mostly involved in the business of leading faculty and managing a school.

One other silence also resounded loudly for the authors. None of the respondents mentioned the word computers, technology, or software anywhere in their recommendations. Although the use of technology in schools is extensive, it was not reflected in principals’ responses. Given the value schools place on technological tools for management as well as to communication with individuals or groups, its absence was highly noticeable.

## 7 Limitations

Although 651 Illinois principals responded to the survey, caution should be exercised when drawing conclusions from the data since this represented only an 18.69% response rate. There is the possibility that those who did not respond may have responded differently. Also, principal responses may be somewhat inconsistent. Finally, since only Illinois principals were surveyed, generalizations beyond Illinois are limited. By replicating the study both in Illinois and in other states, transfer of findings may be possible.

## 8 Summary

It is well documented that educational leadership programs need to improve how theory is related to practice and embedded in the field-based internship experience (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Levine, 2005). However, the voices of many principals have not been heard. This research study sought to identify Illinois principals' recommendations on how to improve administrative internship programs for aspiring school leaders. In particular, it focused on their suggestions regarding what experiences most critical to include in the administrative internship. In addition, it sought advice from principals on how professors of educational administration could improve the quality of the internship experiences they offer. The results of this study can provide valuable insights into ways educational administration professors can enhance both the substance and structural components of the administrative internship and ultimately improve the preparation of school level leaders.

“Research suggests that clinical activities led by practicing administrators and university coaches that are meticulously planned and arranged prove to be meaningful learning opportunities and experiences that interns highly value” (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008, p.312). Principals in this study echoed this research. Overall, they suggested that increased emphasis be placed on practical, hands-on management and “leadership” type experiences particularly related to ELCC Standards 1 – 4.

Specifically, respondents noted the more attention should be focused on budgets, hiring, personnel, student discipline, class schedules, and parent groups. One somewhat surprising result was the overwhelming numbers of responses that centered on finance and budgeting concerns. Although this study did not provide any direct insights into this area, the fact that future administrators were classroom teachers before assuming their principal positions and were most likely never required to contribute to the district or school finance/budgeting process may partially explain this result. None-the-less, the data suggest that principals highly recommend the need to include fiscally related experiences in the internship.

Respondents also highlighted the need for interns to experience several specific principal management duties including bus scheduling, supervision of after school activities, conducting efficient meetings, and preparing state required reports. They also noted that interns should have experience with special education, RtI, and 504 plan development. In addition, they suggested that internships be scheduled over the course of the school year and include the numerous tasks associated with the opening or closing of the school year.

In addition, principals recommended an increased focus on the supervision and evaluation of teachers. Also, more experience with curriculum, instruction, and student and program assessment including professional development were mentioned. Although these areas relate to school improvement initiatives, university professors should strategically collaborate with on-site mentors to design authentic experiences that place interns in a leadership roles focused on the specific implementation of projects designed to improve student achievement. Many internship programs may provide opportunities for observation or group participation, but fail to encourage and require the intern to lead important work related to school improvement (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005).

No finding was more surprising than the fact that no principal mentioned technology. This may be because technology is assumed to be integrated into the other responsibilities of the school-level leader or possibly not viewed as nearly as critical an element of school leader preparation as some might suspect. Lastly, it was noted that ethical decision-making (Standard 5) and focus on the larger context (Standard 6) were not directly identified by principals. This exclusion may be related more to the need for novice administrators to focus on the management and leadership aspects of their roles if they are to be initially successful rather than reflect a de-emphasis of Standards 5 and 6 overall.

If educational leadership professors are to prepare highly effective school leaders, particularly at the principal level, an examination of what experiences should be included in the internship as well as what site supervisors and university professors can do to improve the administrative internship experience need to receive the highest priority. These will help to ensure that educational leadership preparations programs not only provide quality internship experiences but that these align with the growing needs of K-12 schools.



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