Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Preparing Superintendents to Lead in Rural 21st Century Schools and Communities*

Ted Price, Ph.D
Marsha Carr-Lambert
Sharon Harsh
Paul Chapman

Abstract

One criticism of school leader preparation programs, for rural and/or urban administrators, has been that program builders have developed learning experiences for school leaders in the isolated world of academia. Rural leadership, especially, demands a leader preparation program that can bring a focus and a model of student and school success to an existing community and culture. Understanding leadership in a rural setting must be a component of any meaningful preparation program for superintendents planning to lead in rural communities. A team of six experienced rural school superintendents and two higher education school leaders will build and deliver the program of study for this project. A collaborative model for developing rural superintendents, as transformational leaders, is the basis of this research. Considering Levine's comments on improvement of leadership preparation programs, and many others who have turned a research lens on how school leaders are prepared, gives rise to the project.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content

*Version 1.2: Mar 23, 2010 2:11 pm GMT-5
†http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/

Commons, this module is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, [1] Volume 5, Number 2 (April - June, 2010). Formatted and edited in Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech and Janet Tareilo, Stephen F. Austin State University.

1 Introduction

One criticism of school leadership preparation programs, for rural and/or urban administrators, has been that program builders have developed learning experiences for school leaders in the isolated world of academia (Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005). Rural leadership, especially, demands a leader preparation program that can bring focus to a model of student and school success in an existing community culture. Understanding leadership in a rural setting must be a component of any meaningful preparation program for superintendents planning to lead in rural communities (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002).

A team of six experienced rural school superintendents and two higher education school leaders will build and deliver the program of study for this project. The team of investigators will use a mixed-method approach to the longitudinal evaluation for the study. We outline constructive criticism of educational leadership preparation programs over the past 35 years, not as an exhaustive review, but selective to our purpose of connecting our critics to positive changes in how leaders are prepared.

2 Preparation

2.1 Using the Past for Growth and Program Development

The second edition of *Educational Organization and Administration: Concepts, Practices, and Issues* by Morphet, Johns, and Reller (1967) is a comprehensive text aimed at the heart of educational leadership development. Many good concepts of what a school administrator should know are found in this publication. Ideas expressed by Morphet et al. affect how school leaders are prepared for educational leadership today. Some considerations for program builders are (a) cooperative decision-making, (b) the knowledge base of educational leadership, (c) program evaluation, and (d) how to provide the best learning environment for students.

Halpin (1957) suggests that administration is a human activity that involves four components: (a) the task, (b) the formal organization, (c) the work group or groups, and (d) the leader or leaders. Morphet et al. take the components and apply them directly to what school administrators should understand:

1. The school system's tasks may be largely defined by means of laws and regulations.
2. The administration's perception of the school system's task may be different than the perceptions of the other members of the organization and is a potential source of conflict.
3. Different groups within the system may have goals that are in conflict with the task of the organization. This is a potential source of difficulty.
4. An effective administrator must be a group leader, and this may be difficult if the goals of the primary groups are in conflict with the goals of the formal organization. When such a situation occurs, informal organizations develop in order to achieve the goals of the primary groups. The task of the administrator-leader is then to bring the formal and informal groups into congruence with respect to goals, if he/she is to be an effective leader (p. 138).

We asked a rural elementary school principal to comment on each of the four ideas of Morphet et al., and if relevant for today's school leader, to cite an example. The response to the first notion of how external forces influence what school leaders do follows:

[1] http://ijelp.expressacademic.org

2.1.1

In Virginia we have the Standards of Learning (SOL). From the federal level we have No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Specifically, NCLB dictates how we will test special needs students. Our testing procedures and reporting of the results are mandated from the federal level. The perceptions of success or failure of a school are tied to a single test. I think they have built a direct conflict between the goals of NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This, to me, is an example of how external forces, where I feel my influence limited, are setting the conditions of my work (Perry, 2001).

The second notion of Morphet et al. speaks to how conflict arises in school organizations because a school leader may have a different idea about what schools should be doing as opposed to other members of the organization. The current example follows:

2.1.2

Yes, I have seen that happen. In our county we want to have a school system, not a system of schools. When it comes down to doing something that I know will better serve my school's stakeholders, I can't just unilaterally decide to move my faculty in that direction. The demographics of my school are different than those of the other schools in the county, and there are whole pedagogical approaches that are researched, designed for countywide implementation, and packaged to distribute to school principals without any input from principals. This frustration can at times cause conflict between principals, central office administrators, and school board members. Conflict resolution comes when central office administrators have good communication with site leaders, and in my case, I have been able to implement two programs specific to my school that were not implemented countywide. The superintendent was well aware of the different demographics of my school's stakeholders.

The example cited by Dr. Perry above and for the third idea of Morphet et al. indicates evidence that groups within school organizations encounter conflict because task orientation is not viewed in the same way. The example follows:

2.1.3

A good example of that is how some districts have a goal to reduce the number of special education students they have. There are some administrators who feel like special education students have been over-identified in the past. That means there is an overcompensation not to identify children who need services. This impacts a school because there are accommodations made for children with special needs when it comes to teaching and testing them. Students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 may have a test read to them, and given how test scores are used as the sole indicator of how a school is doing, this has an impact on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

The fourth idea given by Morphet et al. relates to the leader's ability to bring informal groups, who do the work of the organization, in line with what formal groups at the higher levels of the organization want in terms of how they think work should be done. Dr. Perry's example follows:

2.1.4

This sort of thing plays out all the time by grade levels. First grade teachers want to do something this way, and second grade teachers think another way is better. A good example for me unfolded this year when I approached one grade group to try to boost academic expectations and student achievement in language arts. I felt they needed to raise the bar of what to expect from their students as far as academics went. When I started to talk to them about spending more time on reading, writing, and arithmetic, my efforts were met with some resistance. This group of teachers had worked together for 15 years, and to change how they do their work can be a challenge. I introduced them to a new way of teaching writing skills and showed how another kindergarten teacher had used the method with great success. In the example I showed them, the teacher had her students writing five-sentence paragraphs. They finally came around to using this

proven method, but it didn't happen without some teaching and coaxing on my part and within-group peer teaching and encouragement.

The above examples illustrate how past research in educational administration remains viable for school leaders today. Good educational leadership preparation programs build upon sound concepts, using the work of those who have gone before, to ensure the delivery of a curriculum that is rich and meaningful for future school leaders to enrich the knowledge base in terms of content and delivery format.

2.2 School Leadership: Preparation Driven by Research

Milstein, Cordeiro, Gresso, Krueger, Parks, Restine, and Wilson (1993) published *Changing the Way We Prepare Educational Leaders: The Danforth Experience;* the main intent was to help educational-administration preparation programs improve. The culmination of this work resulted in a how-to manual for program builders.

Some of the main concepts presented by Milstein et al. are solid planks for program builders to consider:

1. There is an institutional readiness for growth and program renewal that prompts individuals and groups to become actively involved.
2. The opportunity for renewal is applied to the entire existing program. Open discussions for changing all aspects of recruitment, selection, learning needs, academic offerings, and delivery methods are on the table.
3. Build in an internship or practicum that is close to the living work experience of a school leader. The internship experience must provide a substantial amount of time for the real work experience.

Milstein et al. completed their work and published these findings so principal preparation would improve. They wrote: *To make the process work, all interested parties must be convinced that the program will lead to a win-win situation:*

1. Students need to see their preparation programs as meaningful and relevant.
2. Faculty need to recognize that they can do a better job of preparing students and that they will have greater access to field sites, which will increase their knowledge base for teaching, research, and writing.
3. School districts need to understand that they will have a larger and more direct role in identifying and sharing in the preparation of the next generation of leaders.

With this combination of potential payoffs and a willingness to stay the course for perhaps five years or more, the potential for creating and maintaining meaningful field-based programs is greatly increased (p. 218).

2.3 Education Leadership Preparation: the Center of the Debate

Thinking globally and acting locally is an approach many stakeholders are pursuing to keep leadership preparation a viable issue in the wider world of cradle-to-grave education. Principal preparation programs have improved because of continual research and debate about how to make better school leaders. For many years, especially since the mid-1990s when the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards came to the front and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) put new accreditation standards in place for preparation programs; school leadership has improved. The ISSLC standards were revised recently (2009) and the ELCC standards are currently under revision.

The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), American Educational Research Association (AERA), National Council for Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and many other stakeholders claim a common ground for school improvement through the betterment of school leaders. Keeping true to the honest debate about school leadership preparation is how to improve it. Levine (2005) wrote, "If the critics have over-reacted, education schools have

under-responded. Rather than acknowledging that they have real problems to confront, education schools have for the most part continued to do business as usual" (p. 6). Regardless of one's support or not of this view, its effects on the debate are stimulating on a national scale.

We view the national conversation on the preparation of school leaders as an opportunity to focus on transforming the superintendent's role. In order to prepare superintendents for what Thomas Friedman (2005) has termed a "flattened world" of hyper-competition, the existing model of superintendent preparation is reconsidered in this project. This is the first of a three-phase project designed to unveil information about (a) how to build a superintendent preparation program collaboratively with multiple stakeholders, (b) what are the most important operational procedures for constant program renewal and sustainability, and (c) what happens with program graduates as they progress in their profession.

3 The Delivery Model

3.1 Preparation for a New Delivery Model

Learning Organizations: Culture, Technology & Change was a course designed originally to address 21st century instructional skills as introduced by the West Virginia Department of Education. Later, this course was altered to include skills necessary for a rural superintendent in the 21st century environment. This was in response to the challenge of understanding the cultural chasm of socio-economical status that often exists in the rural community. As a result, supporting and leveraging technology into schools became an operational challenge for the rural leader. The course design presently offered will be altered to provide instruction that includes: free webpage designs, wikis, blog sites, and the appropriate advancement in the delivery of instructional technology.

When designing a course(s) for this model of rural leadership, several factors were considered. First, the content needed to be aligned with the selected accountability measures. Second, the content needed to be student driven, which meant that the content could actually change from course to course (Nisbett, 2009), especially in the area of technology that changes almost daily (Penn, 2007). Third, the content of the course needed to be a collaborative model that would blend with other courses offered in the model (Tapscott & Williams, 2008).

3.2 Another Dimension of the New Delivery Model: Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

The PBL strategy provides a framework and case method process for increasing the rigor and relevance of the formal education work and gives students the opportunity to collaboratively analyze and apply the course material to scenarios that closely approximate what they would encounter in practice (Hammond, 2007). Similarly, the PBL strategy provides students, and in this case, emerging administrators, with opportunities to cultivate the collaborative analysis and decision-making skills that are essential for successful implementation of distributive leadership.

In addition to using PBL for developing professional expertise, PBL strategy is uniquely applied to the 21st century superintendent certification program in two ways. First, the PBL approach provides an overarching theoretical foundation for the program and undergirds a commitment to providing a curriculum that couples the presentation of course concepts with an immediate and on-going application of skills in a 21st century context. Each course is designed around an authentic problem of practice, and instructors collaborate with students throughout the semester to apply course content to the resolution or completion of a PBL scenario. Second, the PBL strategy is used to unify the entire certification program through a macro-level problem of practice. At the onset of the program, a current situation is identified which relates to the dispositions and professional standards required for the superintendency. Students work toward the resolution or completion of a culminating PBL task, using the individual course, or micro PBL situations, as building blocks that lead to a comprehensive set of proficient skills. Each of the micro PBL projects, as well as a macro PBL assignment, is used to build a portfolio that will showcase student acquisition of the expected professional dispositions and standards.

3.3 Responsive Leadership in Appalachia: People, Place, and Knowledge

The success of this project relies on a participant's understanding of the knowledge, place, and people of rural Appalachia. The conceptual model provided by Johnson, Shope, and Rouse (2009), provides insight into three key components. The first construct is systematic knowledge, which is a combination of two types of knowledge; (1) an academic component (i.e., traditional knowledge such as defined by official curricula and assessed as part of educational accountability systems) and (2) a contextual component learned informally through interactions with others, particularly interactions that occur outside of the formal schooling process. A second construct of this model is place-based learning, which provides leaders with an approach that creates awareness of the school as part of the community. Thirdly, a leader in pursuit of legitimate power must value the human asset and acknowledge the significance placed on the practical and the useful, in context to the people of a rural community. The work of the educational leader, this model describes, is informed by two key ideas with regard to people and place: (1) that forming and maintaining authentic working relationships with non-educators who possess alternative expertise and legitimate authority is crucial, and (2) that the titular position offers an important platform for advocacy work that can only be accomplished through a mixture of titular and legitimate authority (p. 95-99).

Rural leaders maintain a unique role within their environment that is not always comparable to the role of urban leaders. Generational teaching, small-town values, community interactions, socio-economical divides, and structured religion catapults rural leaders into a separate branch of leadership, unique and uncharacteristic of traditional models. Diversity in rural leadership lies in socio-economical classes. This divide is paramount in the rural environment when leaders must build bridges across a cultural chasm. With limited exposure to nationalities or other diverse cultures, culture can become the great divide. Traditional values of rural communities are relevant to rural education, and questions arise about the human costs of an education bent only on competitive consumerism (DeYoung, 1995).

4 Conclusion

Rural leadership, especially, demands a leader preparation program that can bring a focus and a model of student and school success to an existing community and culture. Understanding leadership in a rural setting must be a component of any meaningful preparation program for superintendents planning to lead in rural communities. Rural communities have unique needs and abilities related to finding, training, and developing school leaders. Finding superintendents who are well versed in the global effort to reform schools, improve the learning of 21st century students, and provide effective school leadership in rural communities is rare and needed.

5 References

DeYoung, A., & Lawrence, B., (1995) On Hoosiers, Yankees and Mountaineers. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. Ed 383 508

Friedman, T., (2005) *The world is flat: A brief history of the 21st century.* Union Square West, New York: Farra, Straus and Giroux.

Halpin, A. W. (1957). A paradigm for the study of administrative research in education. In Campbell & Gregg (Eds.), *Administrative Behavior in Education* (p. 161). New York: Harper.

Hammond, J.S., Learning by the Case Method: A Note for Education Administrators. In *Managing school districts for high performance: Cases in public education leadership* (2007). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

Howley, A., & Pendarvis, E. (2002). *Recruiting and retaining rural school administrators.* Washington D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED470950)

Johnson, J, Shope, S., & Rouse, J. (2009) Toward a responsive model for educational leadership in rural Appalachia: Merging theory and practice. *NCPEA Education Leadership Review. 10* (2), 93-103.

Levine, A. (2005). *Educating school leaders.* Washington, DC: The Education Schools Project.

Milstein, M. M., Cordeiro, P. A., Gresso, D. W., Krueger, J. A., Parks, D., Restine, N., & Wilson, P. T. (1993). *Changing the way we prepare educational leaders: The Danforth Experience.* Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Morphet, E. L., Johns, R. L., & Reller, T. L. (1967). *Educational organization and administration: Concepts practices and issues* (2nd. ed.). Englewoods Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Nisbett, R. E. (2009) *Intelligence and how to get it: Why schools and cultures count.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2005). *Nationally recognized programs.* Retrieved July 19, 2005 from http://www.npbea.org/ELCC/ELCC_approved_and_denied_list_1-13-04.pdf[2]

Penn, M. J. (2007) *Microtrends: The small forces behind tomorrow's big changes.* New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

Perry, Mike. (Personal Interview, April, 2001)

Tapscott, D., Williams, A.D. (2008) *Wikinomics: How mass collaboration changes everything.* New York, NY: Penguin Group, Inc.

Young, M. D., Crow, G., Orr, M. T., Ogawa, R., & Creighton, T. (2005). *An educative look at "Educating School Leaders."* Retrieved April 29, 2005 from http://www.ucea.org

[2]http://www.npbea.org/ELCC/ELCC_approved_and_denied_list_1-13-04.pdf