

Education Week

Study Blasts Leadership Preparation: Teachers College Head Calls for New Degrees

By Jeff Archer

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A far-reaching study set for release this week offers a damning assessment of the programs that prepare most of the nation's principals and superintendents.

Led by Arthur E. Levine, the president of Teachers College, Columbia University, the report says most university-based preparation programs for administrators range in quality from "inadequate to appalling."

"Our country needs skilled education leaders more than it has ever before, and our schools of education aren't preparing those people," Mr. Levine said last week. "And there are ways that they could change that would prepare those people."

The critique is part of a larger study of education schools spearheaded by Mr. Levine, a nationally known expert on improving higher education who became the college's president in 1994. The Education Schools Project claims to be the most extensive study ever of such institutions.

Based on four years of research, the report on administrators' preparation involved teams of investigators who

visited 28 schools of education to evaluate their program content, policies, students, and funding, among other characteristics. Twenty-five of the institutions offered degrees in educational administration. Researchers also carried out national polls of education school faculty members, deans, students, and alumni.

The study charges that administrator programs have been dumbed down by low admissions criteria, irrelevant coursework, unskilled faculty members, and incoherent curricula. In particular, the report derides the rigor of the growing number of off-campus programs created by education schools.

So low, in fact, is the report's appraisal of administrator preparation that the lone exemplar it holds up is in Britain.

Among Mr. Levine's recommendations are the creation of a professional-track graduate program, akin to the Master of Business Administration; the elimination of the Doctor of Education, or Ed.D., degree now held by many superintendents and other administrators; and an end to the financial incentives built into salary schedules that encourage teachers to earn master's degrees in educational administration simply to earn more money.

Insider's View

The report, "Educating School Leaders," comes at a time when a few states are threatening to close programs that aren't up to snuff. An increasing number of states also have gone around education schools by allowing district training initiatives to license administrator candidates.

Despite such moves, Mr. Levine's study found that more than 80 percent of education school deans believed that their administrator-preparation programs were good or excellent.

Given that the forthcoming report was written by the head of one of the nation's best-regarded colleges of education, some observers said such complacency could be short-lived.

"When the president of Teachers College makes these criticisms, it can't be dismissed as the mischief of outsiders," said Frederick M. Hess, the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative-leaning think tank in Washington. "It will inevitably force people to engage these criticisms differently than they've engaged them in the last 10 or 15 years."

Other reports expected from the Education Schools Project will examine the quality of teacher preparation and the work of education scholars in academia. The project is supported by about \$2 million from the Annenberg, Ford, Ewing Marion Kaufmann, and Wallace foundations. (The Wallace Foundation also underwrites coverage of leadership issues in *Education Week*.)

While education schools in general get low marks in the report, their courses of study for aspiring administrators were found especially lacking.

Poor to Fair Reports

Among the administrators polled, half said their graduate training did a poor to fair job preparing them to deal with in-school politics. A little more than a third gave the same rating to their preparation for working with parents and other constituents. And 31 percent gave similar marks to their preparation for handling test-based accountability.

A key problem is lack of focus, the report argues. Instead of a coherent curriculum designed to teach people to lead efforts to improve instruction, it describes most programs as "little more than a grab-bag of survey courses" with little connection to the realities of running a school or district. Many students enrolled in such programs don't complain, Mr. Levine said, because they're earning a master's only for the bump in salary.

Even the parts of the training programs meant to offer practical skills were found woefully inadequate. All but one of the 25 institutions in the study that offered degrees in educational administration included a clinical experience, such as an internship. But only

two required that such experiences take place outside the school or district where the student worked.

“Almost all allowed them to occur in their current job,” Mr. Levine said in the interview, “regardless of the quality of the school they were in or of the person they were allegedly mentoring under.”

Critics have long accused universities of using education schools as cash cows, generating more in tuition from a steady stream of students than the institutions actually spend to educate them. With the expansion of off-campus programs in educational administration taught mostly by part-time professors, the report warns, the problem is getting worse.

Fifteen of the 25 schools visited for the study had started satellite programs. One unnamed university had just five full-time faculty members serving 500 students in educational administration around its region. The bulk of the instruction was provided by 22 part-time, adjunct professors, many current school administrators.

Some experts in educational administration agreed last week with the report’s assertion that the proliferation of off-campus programs is troubling. Too often, programs focus more on convenience than quality, said Kent D. Peterson, a professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who mentioned one program that touts “convenient parking” in its advertisements.

“There’s nothing wrong with having satellite campuses or adjunct professors,” he said, “so long as those satellites are taught by adjuncts who are integrated into the program and have the opportunity to improve their instruction.”

But aside from agreeing with the worry about off-campus programs, others noted last week that most of the report’s criticisms aren’t new, and in fact echo a national panel’s report in the late 1980s calling on states to shutter poorly performing educational administration programs.

“It’s become rather a tiresome story to say that leadership-preparation programs are in dire straits, and that there’s been little movement,” said Michelle D. Young, the executive director of the University Council for Educational Administration, a group that includes 75 institutions and is based at the University of Missouri-Columbia. “That’s not the case for the programs I’m working with.”

Education schools, she said, have devoted increasing energy to evaluating their programs and using that information to improve. They also have built stronger connections with school districts to ensure that they’re giving candidates the skills they will need on the job.

A handful of states have raised the bar for the training of administrators. In Louisiana, all of the education schools have been given until this summer to update their administrator-

preparation programs or face having them “decommissioned,” so their degrees would no longer qualify candidates for a state license.

And in many states, education schools seeking state approval are judged against the standards of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, drafted in 1996 under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

But Mr. Levine said his research left him largely unimpressed by such efforts. “I spoke with a lot of people who told me they had redesigned their curriculum and aligned their programs to ISLLC standards,” he said. “And I saw no difference.”

Examples do exist of strong programs, he said, citing those at the University of Wisconsin and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. But his report reserves its highest praise for the National College for School Leadership, launched in 2000 in Nottingham, England, by the Labor government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The national college was conceived as a state-of-the-art training center for school leaders throughout England. Aimed at serving administrators throughout their careers, it offers professional development based on research into the link between leadership and student learning. The college does not, however, grant degrees.

Alternatives Loom

To achieve fundamental change, Mr. Levine calls for overhauling the degrees offered within the field of educational administration. Education schools should stop giving Ed.Ds, he said, because superintendents don’t need doctorates and forcing district leaders to earn them often waters down the programs for those who want to go into academia.

Instead, he said, prospective administrators should be able to earn a Master of Educational Administration, which would be the field’s equivalent of an M.B.A.—a professional degree based on a widely agreed-upon course of study in management and education.

Mr. Levine said he holds out hope that education schools can make the needed improvements, although alternatives are gaining in popularity. Last month, for instance, Maryland agreed to give administrator licenses to graduates of a program in Baltimore to be run by New Leaders for New Schools, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that trains aspiring principals through yearlong residencies. (["New Leaders Group to Train Principals in Baltimore,"](#) March 2, 2005.)

Similar programs have cropped up in Boston, Memphis, New York City, and Philadelphia. Some are run by New Leaders, and others are being organized by the school districts themselves.

“No longer are states willing to accept weak programs in the same fashion,” said the Teachers College president. “To ignore this warning is to allow leadership education programs in America to fade away. They will be replaced.”