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Study Criticizes Ed.D Program; State Educators Divided On Issue

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A national study being released today indicts training programs for school principals and superintendents throughout the nation as "inadequate to appalling" and calls for the elimination of a popular doctorate of education.

After four years of studying degree-granting programs, Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, concludes that curriculum for the education doctorate, the Ed.D, is incoherent and that the doctorate of philosophy in school leadership, the Ph.D, should be reserved for researchers.

Levine described his study to reporters over the weekend at a conference in New York City offered by the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media run by Teachers College.

"We take in anybody with a credit card," he said in general of the nation's 1,200 education schools. "We take in people looking for fast, quick, easy degrees."

The degrees, he said, are basically money mills for schools and for the students who then use them to increase their salaries but then don't take on administration posts. He calls on municipalities, school districts and states to stop linking salaries to degrees and to find ways to tie salaries to specific skills instead.

Arthur E. Wise, president of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education disagreed sharply with the study's findings, saying that his organization accredits many of these programs. Levine, speaking after his presentation, called the accrediting agencies "almost irrelevant."

Here in Connecticut, some school leaders saw merit in Levine's critique while others disagreed. Christopher Clouet, superintendent of schools in New London, said the research he did to earn an Ed.D from Teachers College -- the very institution of which Levine is head -- has been useful.

"It was not irrelevant," Clouet said Monday. "It involved field work and my dissertation was on something very practical. It sounds almost defensive to have to say it like that, but my experience was that it was a positive experience. I use much of what I learned in my job."

Not everybody saw it that way.

Thomas Reale, principal of New Britain High School, found many of Levine's recommendations on target.

“That’s not really that bad an idea,” he said of Levine’s call for eliminating the Ed.D. degree and reserving the Ph.D for the small number of students who pursue careers as policy advisers in state education departments or as university researchers. “If you’re going to be a high school principal, why do you even need one?”

Reale, who holds a Ph.D in educational administration from Purdue University, said he has not found the courses that took him beyond educational specialist, or sixth-year certificate as it is called in Connecticut, applicable to his job. “It does not have an awful lot to do with what I do here on a daily basis,” Reale said.

Robert Henry, superintendent of schools in Hartford, never got a doctorate and he said he doesn’t miss it, though he acknowledged that he’s been lucky to reach the top of his profession without the passport to get there. “Getting a doctorate is a price of admission that most superintendent positions require,” he said. “My experience has carried more weight for me.” To stay current, he says, he attends seminars at Harvard and elsewhere.

Levine blasted masters’ degree programs in education, too, saying they offer “mastery of nothing.”

Valerie F. Lewis, Connecticut state commissioner of higher education, said she hasn’t seen the report so she declined to comment on its findings. But she called Levine a “bright guy who is always at the threshold of change.”

There are six universities in the state that grant doctorates of education -- the University of Bridgeport, the University of Connecticut, the University of Hartford and Central, Southern and Western Connecticut State Universities. The latter three have not yet awarded any Ed.Ds and are operating under a pilot program, but Lewis supports a bill in the state legislature to make those programs permanent.

At a time when state and federal laws are requiring increased accountability in education and when “education is an indispensable element for getting ahead in life,” Lewis said, “it’s healthy to be challenged and to be asked whether our education programs are doing what they need to do.”

Levine said that his “most troubling” finding was that while most schools reported clinical practice, most often that practice was in the degree candidate’s own school. “It didn’t matter what the school’s performance was.”

Richard L. Schwab, dean of the Neag School of Education at UConn, said three years ago his school revamped its requirements and that it is highly selective, admitting a small number of doctoral students and awarding six to ten degrees a year. And he said that clinical practice in the field is central to his program.

Karen Beyard, director of the Ed.D program at Central, called Levine's work "always interesting and always provocative" but disagreed with many of its findings and recommendations.

"People take shots at teacher education every day," she said. "My belief is that programs committed to inquiry, to bringing what science tells us about how children learn into schools, to creating and expanding the ability of school administrators to become true leaders toward school change -- programs that do that are essential."

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