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Study Finds Poor Performance by Nation's Education Schools
By GREG WINTER

American colleges and universities do such a poor job of training the nation's future teachers and school administrators that 9 of every 10 principals consider the graduates unprepared for what awaits them in the classroom, a new survey has found.

Nearly half the elementary- and secondary-school principals surveyed said the curriculums at schools of education, whether graduate or undergraduate, lacked academic rigor and were outdated, at times using materials decades older than the children whom teachers are now instructing. Beyond that, more than 80 percent of principals said the education schools were too detached from what went on at local elementary and high schools, a factor that made for a rift between educational theory and practice.

"I thought there were problems in the field," said Arthur E. Levine, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, who is to release the findings in a report today. "But I didn't realize the depth of the problems."

In the report, Dr. Levine -- who when interviewed described the program at his own school as strong but "absolutely not" ideal -- said he and other experts who worked on the study had focused their efforts on finding education schools capable of producing excellent principals, superintendents and other administrators. They found none in the entire country.

Much of the problem, the report said, stems from what Dr. Levine called "the consumer mentality" dominating the nation's education schools. All states, and nearly all public school districts within them, award higher salaries to teachers who take additional courses and earn advanced degrees. One result of this has been an "army of unmotivated" educators looking for extra credits "in the easiest ways possible" during their off hours, the report said.

The universities, in turn, capitalize on this demand by viewing their education schools as "cash cows," setting low admissions standards and offering "quickie degrees" instead of investing in a quality curriculum, the report said. In fact, while criticism has often focused on the questionable academic qualifications of many teachers, the report found that school administrators typically had substantially lower scores on the Graduate Record Examination than the teachers they supervise.

Principals and superintendents need to be better trained than ever, the report contends, a necessity that puts added pressure on already faltering education schools: federal law is demanding that students make measurable academic progress; where local districts once set the bar, more states have adopted uniform exit exams that students must pass in order

to graduate; and the population itself is changing, with more immigrants whose English is limited.

But others contend that these same conditions are precisely why education schools cannot be held wholly responsible for the failures of their graduates. In the era of federal demands for quick and consistent test-based results from even the most troubled districts, some defenders argue that education schools have little power to set the tone of what goes on in the nation's classrooms, and therefore are often inappropriately blamed for it.

"We've got to blame someone, so we blame the education schools -- easy target," said Theodore R.Sizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Though these schools are far from exemplary, "we're asked to prepare people to go out into a field where their chances of survival are limited; it's like training kamikaze pilots."

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