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Principals pass — then fail

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Parents and boards of education probably feel comforted when they see the title "Dr." preceding the name of the superintendent of schools. Knowing your district is in the hands of a highly trained professional adds peace of mind.

Unfortunately, though, "doctorates of education" are relatively lightweight degrees. The dissertation and research expectations are far lower than those required for a Ph.D. in other fields.

And that master's degree on the wall of the principal's office? The lectures the principal sat through were probably taught by someone who knows little about running a school in today's world, where principals are responsible for far more than making buses run on schedule.

Credentialing programs for school leaders range from "inadequate to appalling," and the coursework required is only marginally related to on-the-job skills, according to a report released Monday by the president of the Teachers College at Columbia University.

So why are education colleges filling classrooms with candidates seeking these marginal degrees? Because of a cozy system that rewards everyone except students, who don't get the school leaders they need.

The degrees are cash cows for the colleges that offer them. While a university might take in \$8,000 a year in tuition for one of these degrees, the program costs only about \$6,000, according to the report. That spillover money gets sent to other departments, such as chemistry or physics, which have expensive labs to maintain.

As for the principals and superintendents, they win the credential they need to help land their next job or pay increase. Knowing that the degrees are useful only as a symbol, they seek out the least demanding programs offered in the most convenient locations.

Too many weak principals and superintendents emerge from this pipeline. That creates problems in the classrooms. Studies of why some schools are more successful than others have arrived at the same conclusion: Successful schools require strong leaders.

Frustrated with the status quo, some school districts are hiring outsiders, especially former generals, who lack a background in education. The KIPP Academy Charter Schools, which are succeeding with inner-city children, train their own principals.

One solution, the report concludes, is eliminating the doctorates and master's degrees and replacing them with a new master's degree that focuses on needed skills. That's worth considering. Unless changes are made, those impressive looking diplomas should be eyed with skepticism.