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School leaders not well trained, report says

By, Zeke Barlow

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Some area administrators feel study should be a 'wake-up call'

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A new study offers a damning view of the master's and doctorate programs that principals and superintendents go through before taking the helm at schools across the country.

The report, titled "Educating School Leaders," says that many programs offer classes that are too easy, that don't help administrators learn to lead effectively. It claims some schools are offering watered-down programs with inappropriate training.

While some Ventura County area administrators and those who teach them say the report paints too broad a stroke when condemning all programs, some said it is accurate in describing the difficulties of preparing administrators for the myriad tasks they face today.

"Studies like this are always a wake-up call, and we should keep our standards high and get rid of weak programs," said Charles Weis, Ventura County superintendent of schools.

The study, conducted by Arthur Levine at Columbia University's Teachers College and released last week, said the role of administrators is constantly changing in a world where they are taking on more responsibilities and are held to greater levels of accountability. In recent years, schools have been asked to measure their performance level as never before.

"The quality of leadership in our schools has seldom mattered more," the report says. "Today principals and superintendents have the job not only of managing our schools, but also of leading them through an era of profound social change that has required fundamental rethinking of what schools do and how they do it."

The report says too many schools have programs with irrelevant curriculum, low admission and graduation standards, weak faculty, inadequate instruction and inappropriate degrees. The programs need to be more purposeful, instructionally focused, work with the entire school community and draw upon innovative methods, the study says.

Linda Purrington, director of Pepperdine University's Educational Leadership Academy, said the study helps in re-evaluating programs, including hers.

"It's a call for action to conduct a critical self-examination of accountability of their leadership programs," she said. Though she thinks her program allows for students to evaluate its effectiveness, she said there could be more critiquing from outside sources.

In recent years, California has raised the standards that principals must meet to become accredited.

"The role of the school principal is changing so dramatically that it is difficult to prepare for everything they need to do," Weis said. "You have to be totally knowledgeable of how to teach every subject and run a large facility, which includes everything from plumbing to paint."

Jeanne Adams, an adjunct professor at the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at California State University, Northridge, agreed.

"I've seen evidence in some places of programs that weren't as rigorous, weren't germane or didn't prepare aspiring administrators for the challenge they were going to take on," she said.

Tim Stephens, former elementary principal and now president of the Conejo Valley Unified School District board, added that many of the things a principal needs to know can only be learned on the job, such as how to deal with a faulty heating system or working with parents.

"Depending on the school they come from, some have better training than others," he said. "I think that you'll get prepared not from just doing the schoolwork, but by being in the trenches and the meaningful training comes."

Joan Karp, chairwoman of the education programs at California State University, Channel Islands, said students at her school are paired with mentors. They are taught by current administrators so they grasp the nuances of the job. And seasoned principals are brought into the classroom to help budding administrators learn how to teach diverse populations of students and deal with the many standards schools have to meet, she said.

Many, including Tim Rummel, director of the Principal Leadership Program at CSUCI, said some programs might be weak because the premium society places on educating school administrators is different from that put on people in the business world.

"Education invests less into preparing its leaders than virtually any field," Rummel said. Adams agreed, saying education doesn't get the priority for training as people in the medical, law or business fields.

Drew Passalacqua, a dean at Colina Middle School in Thousand Oaks, got his master's degree from Pepperdine University and is in a doctorate program at California Lutheran University. The program is very tough, he said; half the people he started with have

dropped out. He said a good chunk of his program concentrates on the changing world administrators have to work in and how to deal with it.

"There is always that idea of constant growth," he said.

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