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A Change in the Way We Think About Leadership

We need fundamental changes in the cultures of organizations and systems . . . leaders working to change conditions, including the development of other leaders to reach a critical mass.

—M. Fullan (2005)

It happens to us all, whatever our roles. We look to the future, trying our best to make wise decisions, only to find ourselves staring into widespread, frustrating uncertainties. Dilemmas like this are known as *long-fuse, big-bang* problems. Whatever direction we choose to take could play out with a big bang—career disillusionment, student failure, and increased ethnic and racial fragmentation. It can take years to learn whether the decisions we make today are wise or not. Even more disheartening, the long-fuse, big-bang questions don't lend themselves to simple solutions. However, we must make some decisions, and we must make them now. We cannot wait for certainty to appear. Since it is impossible to know how the future will play out, the goal is to discover a robust strategy that allows for uncertainties.

NOTE: Material from Ivory, G., & Acker-Hocevar, M. (2005), *Voices From the Field: Phase 3* (Superintendent focus group interview transcripts), Austin, TX: University Council for Educational Administration, is used with permission.

Our university's educational leadership department has an extensive history of working with local districts to prepare the best leaders possible for today's environment of diverse needs and high-stakes accountability. We believe that the relationship between new school leaders and their home universities should continue throughout their careers. Consequently, we developed a preparation program in cooperation with outstanding practicing school leaders and university faculty. This program has continued to be modified as it became obvious that there were increasing concerns about the future availability of qualified school leaders.

Superintendents' concerns included finding ways to better prepare prospective school leaders for the challenges of rising expectations, reduced financial resources, increasing diversity, and decreasing community support as the future becomes increasingly murky and embedded in accountability. Based on personal experiences as recent public school administrators and as current students of leadership theory and research, we began rethinking who needed to be included in this search for answers. It was clear that those interested in the preparation of quality school leaders do not work just in universities. Our experience affirms the value of joining practicing school leaders and university faculty to plan for this uncertain future.

Our leadership preparation program was designed by the university staff authorized to prepare school leaders, practicing district leaders who will employ new leaders, practicing building leaders who will rely on the newcomers as peer colleagues, and the teaching ranks from which prospective leaders-in-training will come. The successful interaction of all four of these sources is the ultimate measure of successful leadership.

In this chapter, we review the events that led us to this point of inviting others to become active partners in preparing school leaders. We introduce four scenarios, featuring personalities that we will refer to from time to time throughout the book. These scenarios illustrate the four critical elements of the planning process: the professor (university), the chief school administrator (school district leader), the building administrator (school building leader), and a teacher (prospective leader-in-training). These characters are fictional composites inspired by real people from our past partnerships and the authentic interests they brought to our conversations. As you read the scenarios, imagine, if you will, that the four are occurring simultaneously in different locations—which is quite close to what actually took place.

The scenarios illustrate the world of uncertainty facing current educational leaders and prospective leaders-in-training. Each story features a representative of one of the four critical players. Each of these critical players has a personal stake in the outcome: a need to be addressed. Each also brings resources, understanding of current conditions, and a contribution to the vision of quality school leadership. In the following pages, we will discuss some of the dynamics that shape the collective future of these four

key players. If you are reading this book, it is quite likely that you are one of our four central players. As you read the scenarios, feel free to add your own personal details to the description that most closely resembles your role in the process of preparing leaders.

The University

Professor Scatain was in his office reviewing the notes from his last site visit with Sally Yarley, one of his first-year principals. The new licensure guidelines required him to visit four times this year, and his first visit had been disturbing. Despite his best intentions, he was afraid that Sally was not adequately prepared for what she was facing. Scatain had advised Sally to take this job, with its challenges, but now he was not so sure that it had been wise counsel or that even he himself would be up to the challenges. In the assigned high school, student performance was below adequate yearly progress (AYP) proficiency standards and had been for two years, which meant that serious steps needed to be taken. Sally's administrative contract for the second year hinged on having her school make AYP this year in both reading and math. Her student population included several minority groups, none of which had met the AYP standards. As Professor Scatain had talked with Sally yesterday, he sensed that she remembered the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and programs and systems to support them but that now she really needed strategies for putting them into place quickly—in order to address her school's unique problems—or she would likely be out of a job. In his education classes, Scatain had talked boldly of problem solving, and the students had generated solutions for multiple scenarios that he had developed from his own experiences, but he now saw that his artificial situations did not realistically portray the current conditions that Sally and his other students were facing. Professor Scatain realized that he needed a stronger connection with the public schools in order to better prepare his students as educational leaders. He wondered whether his friend, Superintendent DeBoyce, of a nearby district, would be interested in a partnership to help improve the university's administrator preparation program.

The Public School District Leader

Superintendent DeBoyce looked over the district's list of current administrators, and she noted that nearly two thirds of the names listed were eligible for retirement in the next five years. With new economic growth in the community, she knew that there would be a great need for new leadership in the district, and she wanted to help train these individuals. In her 20 years as superintendent, she had watched many changes come and go, but she was greatly concerned

about the impact of the current high-stakes-accountability atmosphere on district programs. Having recently hired two new administrators, she was disappointed that they seemed unprepared to meet the challenges of this politically charged environment. The candidates had come highly recommended, equipped with strong research backgrounds, but they seemed to lack the skills and knowledge to lead a staff in changing traditional practices in order to improve student performance. These applicants were also unaware that their middle-class-advantaged experiences were very dissimilar to those of the students in their buildings, and they did not seem to know where to find the needed resources. Frustrated, Superintendent DeBoyce picked up the phone to call one of her former professors, Professor Scatain, to see whether they could work together to develop a plan that would prepare administrators for this new environment—leaders who could build the leadership capacity of the entire system.

The Public School Building Leader

Principal Yarley looked through the small window of her office. She enjoyed watching the student life as she worked on her building report for the year. As she completed the information, she realized that she had learned quite a bit on this, her first year as a new principal of an elementary school, but she had learned most of it on the job. She planned to have a talk with the major professor of her doctoral program next week to review some items she thought would be beneficial for students like her, who wanted to become quality principals. First of all, she would tell him that he needed to spend a lot more time teaching students ways to help staff members get along and work together to improve student performance. Sally was still amazed at how often she'd been called upon to mediate all kinds of issues—between and among students, staff members, parents, community members, and even those who supervised her at the central office—and someone could have prepared her better for the 24/7 demands on her time. Now that she had finished the first year, she did have a better idea about ways she could streamline those demands, but it would have helped if some hints about such demands had been given during her studies, as well as ideas about prioritizing and time management. Her students had made some progress as their teachers focused on improving math and reading scores, but she was not sure about the next steps to continue that progress. As Principal Yarley finished up the report, she also made a note for Professor Scatain about public appearances, especially with the board members. She knew she would be grilled when she presented this information: Their enrollment was declining and so were the test scores, especially for the special education students, and she would have to be ready for all their questions. They had worked hard as a whole building, but the results didn't show yet, and it would probably take three years for all their efforts to result in higher test scores. As she looked out the window

again, she realized that it was 8 p.m. and she was alone in the building. She had missed dinner and her daughter's soccer game. She quickly added "finding balance" to the list for Professor Scatain.

The Leader-in-Training

Karl Weiss perused the brochure from the university about the master's program in educational administration. He noted the classes and the length of time required, and considered his schedule. He had been teaching English for seven years at Midvale Middle School and sponsored the "Science Olympiad" students. His administrator had often suggested that he consider administration, and he was interested because he thought he could do a better job than some current administrators. He had previously asked about support from the district as to whether he should consider taking classes toward building licensure. The response was less than he expected—no release time, though his principal had offered moral support. Karl took an education class last summer and had not been impressed with the textbook applications as to what school life was like. The information seemed way out of date, and he wondered whether the administrator preparation program was any different. He thought about his students and realized that though he was trying to do all he could to help them, he often provided too much help, and he wanted to learn how to help students develop leadership and independence skills. He had asked colleagues for assistance, but they were not much help and had few suggestions. Two of them told him that if he waited long enough, the No Child Left Behind requirements would "go away." They were almost ready to retire and were not as concerned as he was about student performance. He stopped by the main office on his way home and picked up a colorful brochure from his mailbox. The brochure described a new partnership for leadership training that was a cooperative effort of the school district and the local university. The timing of the brochure with his own interests was perfect. Karl decided to apply.

Each of these four players has a key role in the process of training educational leaders. The leadership preparation model presented in this book recognizes that each player must be actively involved in the partnership, by collaborative planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training program. This model also respects the unique perspectives and experiences each player brings to the process. This chapter defines the educational landscape for today's educators; the ineffectiveness of traditional programs; the increasing challenges facing educators today, along with the emerging research; and suggestions for addressing the obstacles that exist in both universities and schools.

THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The educational landscape and the world for new administrators has changed dramatically since 2001, when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) went into effect, with its emphasis on requiring *individual* student performance at a proficiency level and serious sanctions placed upon schools that did not meet that standard. This high-stakes accountability for each student is very different from the previous expectation for schools to do their best for *most* of the students, with no real accountability.

Just as the problems facing school leaders have multiplied exponentially, the number of educators wishing to take steps toward school leadership is dwindling rapidly. An estimated 40% of school administrators across the nation are expected to retire by 2005 (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000, as cited in Gustafson, 2005, p. 1). Many administrators are taking advantage of early-out options. Across the nation, there are enough licensed administrators to fill all positions, but many are choosing not to serve. As the tuition costs and testing requirements increase, fewer educators are choosing the administrative route—many opt to stay in the classroom, and others leave education altogether. Due to the comparatively low salaries for teachers and administrators, especially in light of the increased responsibilities, many qualified administrators are selecting more lucrative, less politically stressful careers.

Additional reasons cited for the looming shortage of quality administrative candidates include the following: not feeling prepared for the type of work now required, societal issues, lack of support, polarized cultures, and increased accountability (Cusick, 2003, and Potter, 2001, as cited in Gustafson, 2005, p. 3). Furthermore, licensure requirements for new administrators have simultaneously increased in amount, in rigor, and in expense, which also reduces applicants. These demands on prospective and practicing administrators increase daily, with a negative impact on recruiting efforts. At the same time, universities and public schools alike are being asked to document their success in improving student performance in order to maintain accreditation and/or employment. These major changes have combined to create a “perfect storm” for educational leadership that requires parallel changes in both universities and public schools related to leadership preparation programs.

INEFFECTIVE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Educational leaders trained in traditional leadership preparation programs have often indicated that their university preparation programs did not prepare them for the world they faced upon entry into the administrative world:

Most said their training programs did not touch on the more complex combinations of leadership skills used in cultural, strategic, or external development leadership. (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003, p. 38)

I don't think that universities ever prepared me. (Ivory & Acker-Hocevar, 2005, p. 5)

Furthermore, many new principals have indicated that they learned more from their first-year experiences on the job than from their preparation programs:

Regardless of their training, most principals think they learned the skills they need "on the job." (Portin et al., 2003, p. 37)

This disconnect between the ivory-tower idealism and the grim realities faced by educational leaders today is rapidly escalating and is exacerbated by the sanctions of NCLB and accreditation institutions (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], North Central Association [NCA], etc.). These difficulties must be addressed now if universities and schools are to be viable institutions of leadership training and learning in today's world of education.

Graduates of leadership preparation programs are not the only ones who describe these programs as ineffective and inappropriate. Following a long-term comprehensive study of administrator preparation programs in 2005, Arthur Levine, of Columbia University, found that the majority of existing administrator preparation programs were unsuccessful in preparing school leaders:

This study found the overall quality of educational administration programs in the United States to be poor. The majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities. (Levine, 2005, p. 23)

Levine (2005) listed several reasons that explain why such programs were unsuccessful, and he identified a nine-point template for judging the quality of school leadership programs: purpose, curricular coherence, curricular balance, faculty composition, admissions, degrees, research, finances, and assessment (pp. 12–13).

Coincidentally, as public schools began coping with escalating expectations for documenting student proficiency in reading and math, university programs preparing educational leaders were being criticized for being ineffective. Some programs were unable to demonstrate any effect at all on building leadership skills:

Specifically, we know very little about issues ranging from how we recruit and select students, instruct them in our programs, and monitor and assess their progress. . . . In particular, there is almost no empirical evidence on the education of those who educate prospective school leaders. (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004, p. 28)

INCREASING CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

As universities struggle with the challenges of preparing effective leaders, school administrators struggle with expectations for success with every child in their schools and districts, no matter what student needs might exist. As all schools face the sanctions-based evaluation system, NCLB, school leaders must become knowledgeable about ways to help every underperforming student and group achieve the required proficiency scores in the areas of reading and math. School leaders are anxiously working to make difficult adjustments to a flawed, hierarchical system of schooling that was designed when it was acceptable to ensure that most students were successful. Principals understand that to retain their positions, their schools must meet the requirements of NCLB.

Universities also face new pressures to provide performance assessment information for their preparation programs. The program review process for NCATE now requires the submission of multiple assessments that provide evidence of candidate mastery of specialized professional association standards (NCATE, 2004). In response to these requirements, universities are in the process of developing innovative and flexible programs within traditional systems.

EMERGING RESEARCH

There is hope for a solution to these problems. Research does exist to guide us in developing and improving partnerships for preparing highly qualified educational leaders. Over the past several years, the findings of a number of large research projects have clearly indicated that uniting schools and universities is a better way to prepare administrative leaders, with a background in research-based practices applied to real-world scenarios. For example, 16 states of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) identified six strategies from research and from direct experiences with schools, universities, and state agencies that could be and should be used to develop highly qualified principals: “Single out high performers; recalibrate preparation programs; emphasize real-world training, link principal licensure to performance; move accomplished teachers into school leadership positions, and use state academies to cultivate leadership teams

in middle-tier schools” (Bottoms, O’Neill, Fry, & Hill, 2003, pp. 2–3). SREB has now established a network of 11 universities that have redesigned leadership preparation and development programs using these strategies and continue to collect data from these nontraditional administrative preparation programs.

More recently, a meta-analysis of more than 5,000 studies and 2,894 schools and approximately 14,000 teachers, 1.1 million students, and 652 principals was completed by McREL (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). From these studies, specific leadership responsibilities and practices were identified that are significantly correlated with student achievement. These responsibilities were cross-checked with the *ISLLC Standards for School Leaders* (1996), a guiding framework for administrative licensure in several states. The follow-up study by McREL, *The Leadership We Need* (Waters & Grubb, 2004), identified changes needed for administrator preparation. Researchers’ recommendations included the development of programs to teach the knowledge and skills needed for principals to be able to use research-based leadership skills, hiring teachers who have a deep understanding of those research-based practices, and collaboration of all school officials to support second-order change (Waters & Grubb, 2004).

Clearly, universities and school districts have mutual needs that could be met by pooling talents, resources, and expertise. University and school collaborative partnerships can provide mutually beneficial solutions to the vexing problems facing both institutions. Universities provide research-based best practices and theoretical frameworks for improving student performance. Schools provide real-world settings for application, analysis, evaluation, and monitoring of practices to improve student performance. A dynamic model that pulls theory and practice together into a revolving, long-term relationship can develop around a new vision of leadership with a strong theoretical basis, and ongoing practice can strengthen both institutions. The curriculum can be collaboratively developed in an integrated, spiraling fashion, provided in field-based settings and based on strong, research-based standards. Students, professors, and administrators can learn to lead together, each playing reciprocal roles as leaders, followers, teachers, and learners. Collaborative university and school partnerships that face up to the stark realities facing both institutions can develop strong, student-centered solutions that result in simultaneous, continuous growth and revitalization of both organizations and those working in them.

PARTNERSHIPS ADDRESS THE OBSTACLES

The time is ripe for university preparation programs to join forces with practitioners to find solutions to current educational dilemmas—solutions that are mutually beneficial and will develop quality leaders at all levels

of both organizations, exemplary leaders capable of thriving on the challenges they will face. But this will not be easily accomplished, and many obstacles will be encountered.

First, not everyone in universities or in school settings is open to changing past practice. However, we found in our experiences that this was not the obstacle we had anticipated: There are many educators in each of the four critical player roles who are interested and willing to get involved. The conversations can begin with those available. Second, there will always be limits imposed by inadequate available resources, governance structures, and regulatory standards. Those committed to improving leadership will work through obstacles by directing conversations toward what *can* be done, rather than wasting energies lamenting what is not possible. Indeed, changes in structural limitations can occur if a strong case is made for other options. To get around fiscal limitations, we have worked with groups of school districts joining forces on a single partnership project to share costs.

Not all school districts are located geographically near potential university partners. With the technology options available today, this barrier should be quickly set aside. Possible options here are limited only by the willingness of partners to change traditional communication practices. We have partnered with single districts located in our own immediate area, and we have also worked with two to three school districts forming joint partnerships, even though the districts were separated by up to four or five hours of driving time. It is easy to imagine partners from several hours away who are able to establish workable partnering arrangements through technology. Another model we are just beginning to explore involves single or a small number of participants coming from a sizable number of very small districts and joining together online. Working out partnership terms that meet the diverse needs of many different partners is another challenge, but not an insurmountable obstacle that will limit conversations with those interested. We are also encountering increasing interest in partnership formats that focus on building leadership capacity in teachers who intend to remain in classroom assignments—yet another dimension of leadership that can also be addressed by combining the talents and expertise of the four critical players in our scenarios.

SUMMARY

We challenge educators in leadership positions (university instructors, superintendents, principals, and leaders-in-training) to join us in finding ways to upgrade, improve, and revitalize educational leadership programs in their own settings. We have found university and public school collaborative partnerships to be an effective way to prepare successful, caring leaders for schools.