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Preparing administrators to lead 21st century learning

By Jennifer S. Jones and Yanira Oliveras-Ortiz

Learning 21st century learning in schools looks radically different than it did 25 years ago. The rapidly changing demographics of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, racially and economically diverse students brings a complicated mix of challenges for administrators who must respond to the interests and needs of their school communities.

Former Wallace Foundation President Christine DeVita, in a 2005 report called, "School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals," described the role of 21st century principals as those who "...need to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. They are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district office officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and they need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs."

The responsibilities of administrators have certainly changed from the past. No longer can preparation programs primarily focus on teaching leadership and management theories, school law and managing facilities. Administrators must develop the depth of knowledge to lead curriculum and instruction, as well as influence and develop others while addressing equity and diversity issues. Effective school leaders must be equipped to lead a wide range of school transformation that affects teaching and learning. As the role of the school leader continues to shift, significant consideration must be given to the preparation of these leaders.

Higher education has an extraordinary opportunity to prepare aspiring administrators to lead the schools of tomorrow. School leaders must have a vision for a future world where they must prepare students for careers that do not yet exist.



Cultivating future administrators

In their book, "Preparing Principals for a Changing World," authors Linda Darling-Hammond, Debra Meyerson, Michelle LaPointe and Margaret Terry Orr note that principal preparation coursework often overlooks instructional design and professional development, organizational design of schools and building a school community that addresses diversity. Visionary administrators — and those who prepare them — need to keep student performance accountability, pedagogical shifts and experiential learning in mind when developing instructional strategies. This can be done through meaningful leadership experiences that transform theory to practice.

In a 2016 Wallace Foundation report on improving university preparation programs, the foundation reviewed a decade of research emphasizing a strong need for university and district partnerships for high-quality principal preparation. This research expressed that effective principal preparation programs include practical leadership experiences interwoven with coursework, giving aspiring administrators relevant knowledge and experiences they can apply on the job. It is essential for school districts and preparation programs to collaborate in practicum experiences that include instructional leadership on the diverse learner and developmental supervision and how to shape a school's culture through coaching and feedback.

The need for educational leaders with strong instructional coaching skills is more prevalent than ever before. After 19 years of 86 percent of Texas school districts using the Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) as the method of assessing teacher effectiveness, according to 2014 Texas Education Agency (TEA) numbers, districts across the state are implementing the Texas

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Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). For the past two decades, school principals have focused on measuring and judging the quality of instruction in the classrooms, but a limited number of principals have engaged in supervising teachers. Evaluations focus on assessing the teaching process, while supervision focuses on improving the teachers' skills and, eventually, student achievement. Although PDAS was designed with the goal of improving teacher practices, the system has been used as a checklist with little to no impact on instruction. Higher education faculty members have the moral responsibility to develop future school leaders that will comprehend and address the dissonance between teacher evaluations and the true degree of teacher effectiveness in the classroom.

TEA describes T-TESS as a system that "focuses on providing continuous, timely and formative feedback to educators so they can improve their practice." The use of the T-TESS rubric in conjunction with instructional coaching cycles has the potential to help teachers improve their instructional practices. However, the success of a teacher evaluation and professional growth model, such as T-TESS, hinges on the ability of Texas campus leaders to serve as instructional coaches or instructional supervisors.

Schools of the 21st century are required to go beyond assessing teaching practices. Principal preparation programs must commit to developing instructional leaders who have the instructional and curricular knowledge and skills to utilize the T-TESS rubric as a platform for instructional supervision. Programs must provide future school leaders with experiences that develop their understanding of instruction while engaging them in dialogue about effective instructional practices and best practices for instructional coaching.

An integrated learning approach

Research has shown that highly effective educational leadership programs include internship experiences that provide future leaders with authentic, relevant opportunities. The experiences future leaders engage in should include activities that focus on developing their curriculum and instruction skills to facilitate instructional leadership. Higher education programs should require future leaders to spend time in the classroom, observing instruction, engaging in discourse about the observed lessons and using an observation tool, such as the T-TESS rubric, as their platform. Conversations should

focus on helping learners gain a deeper understanding of their roles as instructional leaders and their roles as supervisors — not merely as evaluators of instruction.

To develop the future leaders' skills as supervisors, higher education programs must expose students to instructional coaching theory and practice. By developing future leaders' instructional coaching skills, higher education programs can groom future leaders who will have the understanding and skills to help teachers grow professionally. According to Jim Hull's 2012 "The Principal Perspective: Full Report," school principals are second only to classroom teachers with regard to the impact they have on student achievement. Highly effective school principals can influence student achievement by two to seven months in one school year; ineffective principals can be detrimental to student achievement at the same rate, according to "School Leaders Matter: Measuring the Impact of Effective Principals" by Gregory F. Branch, Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin.

Practicing school leaders and higher education

In a March 9 *Education Week* blog post, Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, wrote that educational research has little to no impact on school practices, given the disconnect between research and practitioners. Stakeholders in the higher education community have the potential to influence the craft of practicing school leaders by creating a culture of collaboration. Action should be taken to build these connections and strengthen these partnerships.

Higher education and school district collaboration is essential for closing the gaps in achievement. By conducting educational research in school districts to evaluate the effectiveness of educational leaders, higher education and practitioners could begin to transform educational leadership. Higher educational research collaboration can impact student achievement in considerable ways by analyzing different variables for statistical significance and determining best practices for instruction and leadership.

School districts and the higher education community have the same mission — improve learning and the profession of teaching. Higher education and school districts have a mutual responsibility to partner in preparing aspiring leaders. Educational leaders must be "beacons of inspiration and direction for teachers and students in their schools," wrote Chris Sun in a discussion guide titled, "School Leadership: Improving State Systems for Leader Development." This requires a strong foundation through effective leadership programs that prepare future leaders to meet innumerable challenges. The efficacy of these partnerships can have the potential to collectively impact schools one administrator at a time.



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