Who Are We Choosing for School Leaders? A Review of University Admissions Practices

Casey Graham Brown
University of Texas at Arlington

Joyce A. Scott
Texas A&M University-Commerce

This study assessed the degree to which school leader preparation programs have adopted reforms in program admissions standards and practices that have been recommended in the literature since 2000, including seeking district nominations for applicants, increasing collaborative efforts, involving district personnel in instruction and intern supervision, and aligning program design with district needs. Results indicated that closer linkage between districts and university leadership curricula are emerging, with greater attention being afforded to district needs.

Introduction

The job of school principal is critical to the operation of a campus and the achievement of its students. Teachers have a direct effect on the students they instruct, but the caliber of the principal impacts all children in the building (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). Universities that offer principal preparation programs have been criticized for their lack of selectivity in recruiting prospective school leaders **(**Levine, 2005). Specifically, critics have charged that institutions cared primarily about large enrollments (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB]**,** 2007), did not involve school districts in the admissions process (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2007), and admitted applicants who lacked the requisite skills or vocation. Lashway (2003) suggested that the aspiring principal pool could be fortified by partnering with school districts to choose program candidates. As early as 2001, the Southern Regional Education Board outlined strategies that states and school districts could use to generate an adequate supply of qualified principals (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). The issue was the same as it is today, to "recruit and train school leaders who have a deep knowledge about how to improve the core functions of a school" (p. 7).

The Southern Regional Education Board **(**2007) suggested that districts could advance outstanding teachers into leadership roles and place them in alternate certification programs and later recommended that universities and school districts work together "to recruit, select and prepare future principals with the most promise of improving classroom practices and student achievement" (p. iv). In the context of admissions standards, SREB (2007) urged schools to develop criteria that ensured candidates were effective teachers who had been successful in improving students' learning and had shown leadership potential.

The recommendations for greater selectivity in the admission of students to graduate education designed to prepare school leaders have been in the public domain for more than a decade. The purpose of this study was to discover how much effect these proposals have had on universities' practices in recruiting, choosing, and preparing candidates for the principalship.

Background Literature

In addition to the SREB findings, other researchers have elaborated on the issues surrounding the selection and training of school leaders. From a study of eight successful programs, LaPointe and Davis (2006) found that these universities engaged school administrators in recruiting, chose students who mirrored their service areas demographically, and admitted teachers with more than 10 years in the classroom and expertise in core subjects. In an extensive analysis of exemplary programs, another group of researchers concluded that recruiting is key to program quality and that recruits must have a solid history in instruction, "represent the populations of their communities," and show an aptitude for leadership (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007, p. 149). The Wallace Foundation's (2008) analysis of effective university programs drew similar conclusions: programs need to be more selective and tied to the needs of the districts they serve.

Cheney, Davis, Garrett, and Holleran (2010) examined programs that participated in the Rainwater Leadership Alliance (RLA), a think tank that includes nonprofit organizations, school districts, universities, and foundations. Cheney et al. (2010) examined the dedication of the RLA programs to recruiting and selecting capable, enthusiastic individuals who facilitate the learning of all students. Cheney et al. (2010) wrote,

> while RLA programs reinforce all the skills and dispositions of effective principals during their training, they recognize that these skills, knowledge, and dispositions need to be present to varying degrees at the time of selection; some require full or close to full proficiency before the program begins, while others can be developed during the program. (p. 46)

Methods

The purpose of this study was to assess the degree to which school leader preparation programs had adopted the reforms in program admissions standards and practices that had been recommended in the literature since 2000. For this quantitative study, the researchers reviewed current literature with special attention to recommendations on candidate recruiting and admissions. The researchers chose survey research to gather first-hand information from university faculty members about the status of admissions reform in their programs and chose to assess current practice through members of a large national organization representing educational administration/leadership programs.

Major themes that surfaced in the literature informed the design of the survey. Themes included the need to increase school district involvement, to enhance rigor in admissions criteria, to choose effective and well-experienced teachers, and to enlist candidates representing community diversity.

Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2000) informed creation of the survey. Researchers invited subject-matter experts to review survey items for proper wording and compared the closed-ended items to other questions from the literature to diminish repetition and augment the knowledge base. With the feedback from subject-matter experts, researchers edited items to improve clarity. This process produced a final survey of 37 questions: 34 were closed-ended, requiring respondents to choose from a series of response categories. Three open-ended questions solicited narrative responses.

The survey was administered in person and online to professors of Educational Administration or Leadership who belonged to a national association focused on educational administration. Researchers excluded graduate students and emeritus members so that all respondents were active faculty in university Educational Administration/Leadership programs designed to prepare school leaders. There were 121 surveys distributed to the association's membership; 59 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 48.7%.

Researchers entered collected survey data into an Excel spreadsheet and then imported data and analyzed them with Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software. The results were compiled and reported from the perspective of participants on how their university programs have changed to respond to the recommendations for reform in admissions practices as articulated in recent literature.

Findings

Of the 59 survey participants, 24.5% were assistant professors, 41.5% associate professors, and 28.3% were full professors. Three respondents described their status as adjunct or lecturer. In terms of years of practice, respondents described a wide range of experience: 41.8% reported 1 to 7 years in higher education; 36.4% noted 8-19 years; 14.6% indicated 20-31 years; and 7.9% had served more than 31 years. When asked about their prior professional experience, 59% said they had been a principal or superintendent, while 32% had worked in other administrative roles, and the remainder had been teachers.

Other demographic factors of interest included gender, age, ethnicity, state of residence, and size of university and degree program. Respondents were predominantly male (63%) and White (96.4%), although two African Americans responded, and four faculty (6.7%) chose not to disclose ethnicity. For age distribution, only one member was under 44 years of age, while 20% were 45-54 years of age, 56.4% were between 55 and 64, and 21.8% were between ages 65 and 74, and four chose not to reply.

Faculty represented 20 states and varying types of institutions. By institutional size, the study included universities with enrollments under 10,000 (36.4%), 10,001-20,000 students (40%), and over 20,000 students (23.6%). Their principal preparation programs varied in size from fewer than 50 students (5.6%), to 50-100 students (31.5%), to 101-200 students (27.8%), to 201-400 students (29.7%), to more than 400 students (5.6%).

How Have Universities Involved School Districts in Recruiting and Admissions?

When asked whether program applicants were recommended by their campuses or self-selected, only 78% (46 of 59) of faculty chose to respond. Among them, 89.1% indicated that applicants were self-selected and only 10.9% noted applicants were asked to apply by their campus administrators. Similar results emerged about admitted students where 87.2% of respondents said that admitted students were self-selected. However, 10 faculty members offered supplementary comment indicating that candidate recruiting and selection were not either/or situations but involved both school district input and candidate self-selection. One person noted that a new, district-based MEd program accepted students based on district recommendations and another said that about 25% of program admits were asked to apply by district administrators. Thus, it appears that district involvement in recruiting is increasing, and a few respondents (n=5) noted that district personnel serve on program admissions committees.

Asked to gauge progress in reforming admissions practices, 36 of 54 (66.7%) faculty noted some or promising progress on school administrators' influencing applicant selection; but only 16 (29.7%) faculty acknowledged some or promising progress in tying student selection to cooperating school districts' needs. For the remainder of the admissions decision-making, 30 (55.5%) said that a departmental committee recommended candidates for selection; 33 of 53 (62.2%) reported some or promising progress in department head input to the decision; and 33 (62.3%) reported some to

substantial progress on graduate school input into the admissions decision. Among the respondents, 31 of 55 (56.4%) indicated that they themselves served on the student selection committee for their program.

Researchers sought additional information on changes in student selection processes in the prior 2-3 years. Ten faculty members offered a wide range of responses, from raising the GPA threshold to 3.0, to aligning programs to state and national standards, to increasing attention to leader readiness and teaching experience. One faculty member reflected the impact of state fiscal problems on programs: "With increasing competition among institutes of higher education in the state along with serious budget cuts, almost any student may be admitted to the program."

Have Universities Enhanced Rigor in Admissions Criteria?

To check on how programs had addressed the call to upgrade admissions standards, researchers used a series of prompts to assess progress. Prompts included five areas in the admissions process: GRE scores, letters of recommendation, grades on prior transcripts, leadership potential, and teaching effectiveness. A subsequent question sought clarification about changes made in the student selection process in the prior 2-3 years: 59.2% of respondents indicated no substantive changes had occurred. Reports of changes are included in the topical discussions below.

Perceptions about GRE scores were divided. Asked if program admission required *average* GRE scores, 25 faculty members disagreed, and 24 faculty members agreed. When the emphasis shifted to *above average* GRE scores, 34 disagreed, and only 14 agreed. In a follow-up question, 10 respondents indicated that their programs had increased GRE requirements recently while 4 said that their programs had decreased GRE requirements. Whether faculty mistrust the GRE as a predictor of student success or are satisfied with present standards, the GRE cannot be regarded as an important indicator of increased standards.

On letters of recommendation, respondents were again divided in their opinion about *average letters of recommendation from school leaders,* with 23 disagreeing and 26 agreeing. When the terms changed to *above average letters,* 35 respondents agreed and only 14 disagreed. Judging from feedback, it appears that faculty members seek strong reference letters from school leaders. As an indicator of increased standards, 8 respondents reported that their programs required school district endorsement of applicants whereas 3 reported that their programs had discontinued the practice.

On the previous issues, *not sure* responses were common, but no uncertainty emerged when it came to applicants' academic records. Forty-four respondents (81.5%) indicated that their program required *above average grades on previous transcripts.* For the follow-up question on this topic, 10 faculty members reported that their programs had increased GPA requirements recently.

With respect to the criterion of leadership potential, 74.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that candidates for admission must exhibit this characteristic. Further investigation of applicant qualities probed the role of effective teaching as demonstrated in student learning. Twenty-one people (40.7%) discounted this quality, and 28 (52.8%)

agreed or strongly agreed that strength in teaching was essential for applicants to their programs.

How Have Programs Recruited Candidates Representing Community Diversity?

Researchers sought to discover how leadership programs recruited a diverse student body reflecting the communities they served. Forty-four faculty (74.5%) commented on this question, offering a variety of approaches. Twelve respondents (27%), however, indicated their programs did not make a special effort in this regard or they were unaware of such efforts. One person expressed concern about this issue: "Our students tend to come from a few surrounding areas, and have little diversity and little life experience beyond this area of the state." Others, coming from diverse or urban areas, drew upon those locales to recruit students. Noted one respondent, "We have a student population which matches our region—about 20% minority, primarily African-American." Several faculty members mentioned their personal engagement in recruiting diverse students, the use of alumni and state professional organizations, and school district referrals.

A few participants outlined specific strategies that their programs used to achieve diversity. "We cast a broad net through a layered online recruitment process that targets diversity in recruiting," replied one respondent. Other approaches included showing students from many backgrounds in brochures, contracting with schools showing the desired diversity for cohort sites, marketing to multiple audiences and holding recruiting meetings, including a recruitment component in the master's program, and placing students in diverse communities to build relationships there.

Several respondents cited greater diversity as a priority for their programs. However, many campuses have yet to articulate and implement strategies to achieve the community representation. References to the role of alumni and state professional associations as resources for recruiting leadership program applicants suggest that these organizations might be helpful overall in designing and launching broad-scale recruiting initiatives on behalf of their members.

How do University Programs Involve School Districts?

The literature includes several recommendations about how principal preparation programs should interface with the school districts they serve: seeking district nominations for applicants, increasing collaborative efforts, involving district personnel in instruction and intern supervision, and aligning program design with district needs. Researchers sought to explore these facets of potential cooperation with a series of closed- and open-ended questions.

The recruiting section above revealed closer interface between schools, districts, and programs to identify program applicants than did the closed-ended questions. Whether programs linked admissions to cooperating school districts' needs, only 18 (33.4%) people cited some to substantial progress whereas 36 (66.7%) noted little or no progress. However, when asked about recent efforts to increase program alignment with school district needs, 33 of 53 (67.9%) respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Another promising sign emerged when faculty were asked if their program adjusted

course curriculum to address area school district needs. In this case, 56.4% (31) agreed, and 25.5% (14) strongly agreed.

The broader question about the role of school district personnel in university preparation programs showed promising responses. Thirty-four (61.8%) of 55 faculty members indicated their programs sometimes employed district personnel as faculty, and another 15 (27.3%) indicated they often did. On an open-ended question seeking information about how district personnel were involved, 52 faculty members indicated an array of involvements as follows: 20 acknowledged district participation on program advisory councils; 20 reported district personnel supervised interns; 16 employed district personnel in faculty roles. Respondents indicated other roles for district personnel as follows: 5 included district personnel on admissions committees; 8 noted their participation in course or curriculum design; and 8 reported their engagement in program or graduate assessment. One respondent reported that the state board of education had mandated closer connections between school district and university programs, and that advisory committees would become standard. This latter response may foreshadow new state policy expectations reflected in a recent SREB report (Challenge to Lead 2020, 2012):

> States should adopt policies and standards for leadership preparation programs. The policies should address recruitment of aspiring principals; require leadership preparation programs to offer substantive field-training; establish tiered licensure and evaluation; and call for districts to mentor and provide for induction of new leaders. (p. 13)

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The present study showed that there has been progress toward bridging this disconnect in some areas of concern identified in the literature. Specifically, closer linkage between school districts and university leadership curricula are emerging, with greater attention being afforded to district needs.

Lashway (2003) wrote that preparation programs should "work collaboratively with practitioners to identify and 'tap' strong candidates" (p. 4). In 2005, the SREB cautioned: "Until there is collaboration between districts and universities, a serious disconnect will continue between what districts and schools need principals to know and do and what universities prepare them to do" (p. 2). Five of 59 respondents in the current study indicated that district personnel served on their admissions committees, and a few mentioned district participation via letters of reference, applicant nominations, or district-based cohorts. All of these are good signs of progress, but such progress is not uniform across the profession, and a few respondents indicated changes that seemed to go in the opposite direction.

Signs of greater rigor in admissions criteria were uneven. Although some programs had increased GPA or GRE thresholds, still others had lowered these requirements. According to Cheney et al. (2010), "By testing candidates' responses through multiple activities, programs gain a deep understanding of their candidates' capacities and the alignment of their stated beliefs with their actions" (p. 46). Lashway

(2003) wrote, "entrance into most preparation programs has been determined by self-selection, with half-hearted screening and little outreach to talented individuals" (p. 3).

Preparation program faculty should seek out aspiring principal candidates who are committed to pursuing the knowledge acquisition and attainment of skills required for the principalship. Levine (2005) stated that the admissions standards of the educational leadership programs he studied were lower than other education school programs. The students seemed to be "more interested in earning credits and obtaining salary increases than in pursuing rigorous studies" (p. 31). Not all students enrolled in such programs may aspire to the role of school leader and thus may impact program direction and quality. Martin and Papa wrote that since certification and preparation programs depend on "open enrollment and self-selection for qualifying students, many educational leadership programs serve educators who are not principal candidates, diminishing the programs' effectiveness" (p. 14).

Seeking committed students may impact enrollment numbers. The Rainwater Leadership Alliance programs have considered the challenge. According to Cheney et al. (2010), the RLA programs are prepared to admit fewer students rather than lower their standards. Such a commitment may have to be made by other university programs. Although the programs may experience a reduction of tuition dollars, such decisions may, in the long run, help to ensure program and graduate quality.

Summary

Principal preparation programs must continue to drive the initiative to recruit and to select effective, experienced teachers who are committed to instructional excellence. Doing so may take the involvement of school district leaders who see first-hand the instructional and leadership skills of future educational leadership candidates. Preparation program admissions should be monitored continually to ensure that only qualified applicants are selected. Because campus leadership is second only to classroom instruction in impacting student achievement, such decisions by school leader preparation programs have the potential to affect student learning at candidates' future school campuses (Cheney et al., 2010).

References

Bottoms, G., & O'Neill, K. (2001). *Preparing a new breed of school principals: It's time for action*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved from http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/principal-training/Documents/Preparing-a-New-Breed-of-School-Principals.pdf

Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2013). School leaders matter: Measuring the impact of effective principals. *EducationNext, 13*(1). Retrieved from http://educationnext.org/school-leaders-matter/

Bruner, D., Greenlee, B., & Hill, M. (2007). The reality of leadership preparation in a rapidly changing context: Best practice vs. reality. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 2*(2), 1-26.

Cheney, G. R., Davis, J., Garrett, K., & Holleran, J. (2010). *A new approach to principal preparation.* Fort Worth, TX: Rainwater Charitable Foundation.

Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr. M. T., & Cohen, C. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.

Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., & Meyerson, D. (2005). *School leadership study: Developing successful principals (Review of Research).* Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.

Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

LaPointe, M., & Davis, S. (2006). Effective schools require effective principals. *Leadership*, *36*(1), 16-19.

Lashway, L. (2003). Transforming principal preparation. *ERIC Digest, 165*, 1-8.

Levine, A. (2005, March). *Educating school leaders*. The Education Schools Project. Retrieved from http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf

Martin, G. E., & Papa, R. (2008). Examining the principal preparation and practice gap. *Principal, September/October,* 12-16. Retrieved from http://www.naesp.org/resources/1/Principal/2008/S-Op12.pdf

Southern Regional Education Board. (2005). *Case study: A district-driven principal preparation program design. The Providence School Department and the University of Rhode Island Partnership*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

Southern Regional Education Board. (2007). *Schools need good leaders now: State progress in creating a learning-centered school leadership system.* Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved from http://publications.sreb.org/2007/07V48_School_leadership.pdf

The Wallace Foundation. (2008, June). *Becoming a leader: Preparing school principals for today's schools*. New York, NY: Author.