"Forgottonia"? The Status of Rural Schools in Illinois' Principal Preparation Reform

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Since the fall of 2012, Illinois principal preparation programs have been operating under new state requirements intended to produce highly qualified and effective school principals capable of leading Illinois schools to higher levels of student academic performance. The rules guiding new program development are applied with a broad stroke, attempting to meet the instructional needs of all students in Illinois' diverse public schools located in diverse public school settings. While the rules explicitly state that early childhood, English language learners, students with disabilities, and gifted students should be a focus, the rules overlook meeting the needs of students from academically struggling schools and districts in sparsely populated areas of the state. "Forgottonia," (Bibo, 2013) a name applied over 40 years ago to a group of rural counties in western Illinois, suggested the region's transportation needs had been forgotten by state and federal government officials. Perhaps the name applies today, not only to western Illinois but to all of Illinois' rural regions where developing school leaders for rural school leadership has been forgotten in the reform effort. This paper examines the current reality as Illinois implements new principal preparation programs in regions of the state regarded as fringe, distant, or remote rural areas.

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Introduction

"Forgottonia" is a name long-associated with the rural, west central region of Illinois. In its original use in the 1970s, the name and its grassroots movement asserted this area of the state was forgotten by political decision-makers when it came to department of transportation development. The name Forgottonia brought attention to the disparate distribution of tax dollars supporting infrastructure in Illinois and suggested that counties in this area of the state secede from Illinois (Bibo, 2013). Over time Forgottonia has continued to be used in political and policy development contexts to denote areas that are "remote" (Best, 1990, p. 1A), "isolated from the rest of the state" (Hillig, 1999, p. 1), "overlooked by state economic-development initiatives" ("Opportunity returns," 2005, p. 47), "nearly forgotten by time when it came to growth and development of any kind" (Sommer, 2005, p. C3), and "neglected" (Dettro, 2012, p. 11). Forgottonia today could be used to describe similar, but larger rural regions of the state where new principal preparation legislation has failed to consider how this reform could best be suited to the needs of these areas. This paper examines the potential impact of Illinois principal preparation reform on opportunities for aspiring principals in rural districts of Illinois.

Methodology

This paper seeks to answer several important research questions. The questions guiding the study were structured using Creswell's taxonomy (1998). The Topical questions were:

Topical one: What is the impetus for national reform of principal preparation and how does it address principal preparation with regard to the complex nature of school leadership in rural areas?

Topical two: What are the preparation requirements of the new Illinois rules?

Topical three: What is the context of the new principal preparation programs with regard to schools and districts in rural Illinois?

The Issue question guiding this study was: What challenges are present with the implementation of the new rules in rural Illinois schools? The Central question guiding this study was: What is needed in Illinois to ensure that aspiring principals in rural areas are not disadvantaged or marginalized?

In order to answer the Topical questions, background literature on principal reform at the national level and in Illinois was reviewed to paint a historical picture of the current context. To answer Topical question three, demographic data about Illinois were reviewed and data were obtained from the state of Illinois about the geography of approved programs across the state.

The Issue question was answered by applying the expectations of the program rules to the settings of rural schools throughout Illinois and by assessing anticipated challenges. The Central question was answered by reviewing principal preparation

programs that have a specific focus on leadership development in rural schools and making recommendations for principal preparation more likely to meet the needs of rural schools in Illinois.

Findings

Principal Preparation Reform

At no other time in our country's history have the measured and monitored results of student achievement in the nation's schools been so important. Legislators, educators, and economists lead the voices of national concern as to whether U.S. schools are preparing their students for the future's global competition. Studies have linked high levels of student achievement to effective leadership of building principals (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Yet, analysis of principal preparation programs at the turn of the century found they "are too theoretical and totally unrelated to the daily demands on contemporary principals" (Hale & Moorman, 2003, p. 5). This disconnect led to sweeping national reforms in principal preparation programs in an effort to increase student achievement across the states. Illinois joined this reform effort in July 2010 when Governor Pat Quinn signed into law Senate Bill 226 requiring new and more stringent requirements for endorsement of principals in Illinois. The bill charged the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) with drafting rules by which institutions offering principal preparation programs would design their new programs.

Nationally, rural education challenges have never received the attention that urban education challenges have received (Ayers, 2011; Hill, 2014; "Formula Fairness Campaign," 2014). Since 2000, a biennial publication titled *Why Rural Matters* has attempted to grab the attention of policy makers by providing comprehensive data analysis of the status of rural education in each of the 50 states. The publication provides a descriptive definition of rural education, state-by-state, reporting funding for rural schools, diversity of rural schools with regard to ethnicity, socioeconomic level, and students with special needs, while emphasizing the marginal educational outcomes for rural school students. The goal of the publication has been

> (1) to provide information and analyses that highlight the priority policy needs of rural public schools and the communities they serve, and
> (2) to describe the complexity of rural context in ways that can help policy makers better understand the challenges faced by their constituencies and formulate policies that are responsive to those challenges (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014, p. 1).

In addition, another policy brief titled *Preparing Leaders for Rural Schools: Practice and Policy Considerations* (2005) should have grabbed attention with its focus on the preparation of leaders for rural schools. This important brief represented the collective wisdom of practitioners from rural areas across the nation and asserted that "…each rural situation is unique, there can be no one size fits all approach to either rural education or

to the preparation of leaders for rural schools" (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005, p. 1). As principal preparation reform models swept the nation, South Dakota (Cowan & Hensley, 2012) and Alaska (Rural Alaska, 2014) were examples of states with high numbers or percentages of rural students and/or schools, that assigned priority to the preparation of rural principals with programs unique to rural school leadership. Illinois was not one of these states. The reform of principal preparation in Illinois has been painted with a broad stroke, giving little or no attention to the unique challenges of school leadership in rural areas of the state.

Illinois Principal Preparation Program Rules

The program rules clarify the purpose of the law: "to prepare individuals *to be highly effective in leadership roles to improve teaching and learning and increase academic achievement and the development of all students…*" (emphasis in original) (Title 23, Section 30.20, 2014). Senate Bill 226 and the subsequent rules for principal preparation were a predictable and expected next step following other Illinois reform efforts to raise student achievement, including more stringent endorsement standards for teachers, evaluation of teachers based on professional skills and student growth, and retention of teachers based on student performance rather than tenure. A primary goal of the new principal preparation program rules is to develop the instructional leadership capacity (Title 23, Section 30.20, 2014) of building principals for Illinois schools.

The rules are specific about preparing principals to work with all grade levels from preschool through grade 12. Literacy instruction and numeracy instruction are emphasized. School improvement preparation is focused on "all students, with specific attention on students with special needs (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, students in early childhood programs)" (Title 23, Section 30.30, 2014). But, the rules fail to recognize the needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, some from remote, rural areas, whose schools deserve targeted school improvement efforts.

The rules are explicit about providing principal candidates opportunities to intern in diverse settings, which is one of the few times the rules cite economic and cultural conditions as an area of specific leadership development:

> The internship portion of the program shall be conducted at one or more public or nonpublic schools so as to enable the candidate to be exposed to and to participate in a variety of school leadership situations in settings that represent diverse economic and cultural conditions…(Title 23, Section 30.40, 2014).

Candidates are required to engage in leadership experiences working with teachers in preschool through grade 12 "general education, special education, bilingual education and gifted education settings" (Title 23, Section 30.40, 2014), but are not specifically required to have internship experiences that include students from low socio-economic backgrounds or from rural communities.

Under the new rules, candidates must meet state admission requirements that include preparation of a candidate portfolio and participation in an interview seeking to assess candidates' instructional leadership potential. These requirements, additions to university admission requirements, have specific purposes: to limit student self-selection to the program and to promote university and district partnerships that result in succession planning. While school leadership succession planning is considered important to sustaining school improvement initiatives (Hargreaves, 2005), succession planning is hindered in high-poverty districts and in rural and small town districts where retention of principals is lower (Fuller & Young, 2009). In some rural districts retaining principals as instructional leaders is a challenge when principals have multiple responsibilities and duties beyond curriculum, instruction, supervision, and evaluation. For instance, other duties like those associated with bus transportation and athletics rob principals of instructional leadership time. As well, the culture of some rural communities ensures that locals are retained and promoted with little regard for their effectiveness as principals in deference to being stable members of the community.

The Context of Rural Illinois and Principal Preparation

Many counties in Illinois contain a combination of rural, suburban, or urban populations. The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs uses the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions for determination of metropolitan and non-metropolitan or rural counties. With the OMB definitions, of Illinois' 102 counties, 66 or 65% are considered rural (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2000). Considering these rural counties' land area, they make up 35,000 square miles, 62% of the state's area (55,518 square miles) (Index Mundi, 2010). Figure 1 shows the distribution of metropolitan and rural counties in Illinois.

Figure 1. Distribution of rural and metropolitan counties in Illinois. Light-shaded counties are rural; dark-shaded counties are metropolitan (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2000).

Despite the substantial size of Illinois' rural area, *Why Rural Matters 2013-14* reported 23.8% of Illinois schools are considered rural and enroll 13.4% of Illinois' students (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). The authors noted, "Illinois has one of the largest absolute rural student enrollments…" (p. 45) among the 50 states. The 2011-12 report indicated the percentage of rural students in Illinois had increased by 30% from 1999-2000 to 2008-2009 (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012).

The distribution of wealth aligning with metropolitan areas and of poverty aligning with rural areas is typical. But as noted in Strange, et al. (2012) poverty "tend[s] not to be distributed evenly across a state but…concentrated variously in specific communities within the state" (p. 3). That is certainly the case in Illinois. Illinois child poverty rates in metropolitan counties range from 6.3% to 31.2% and in rural counties from 12.7% to 35.3%. When the mean poverty rates of metropolitan and rural counties are compared, the rural mean is over 4.5% higher than the metropolitan mean (Social IMPACT Research Center, 2011). The greatest concentration of high poverty counties is located in the far south and southeastern counties of Illinois.

The new rules require institutions that previously offered principal preparation programs to redesign their programs and apply for program approval from the Illinois State Educator Professional Licensure Board. Prior to fall 2012 when newly approved principal programs could begin accepting students, Illinois had 32 approved principal preparation programs. Twenty of these university programs were located in Cook County, where Chicago is located, and in collar counties, those that border Cook County. Nearly two-thirds of the principal preparation programs served the metropolitan area that surrounds Chicago. Ten university programs served the central and southern Illinois area. As of October 2013, 20 programs had been approved. Figure 2 shows the institutions or entities with newly approved principal preparation programs and their county locations.

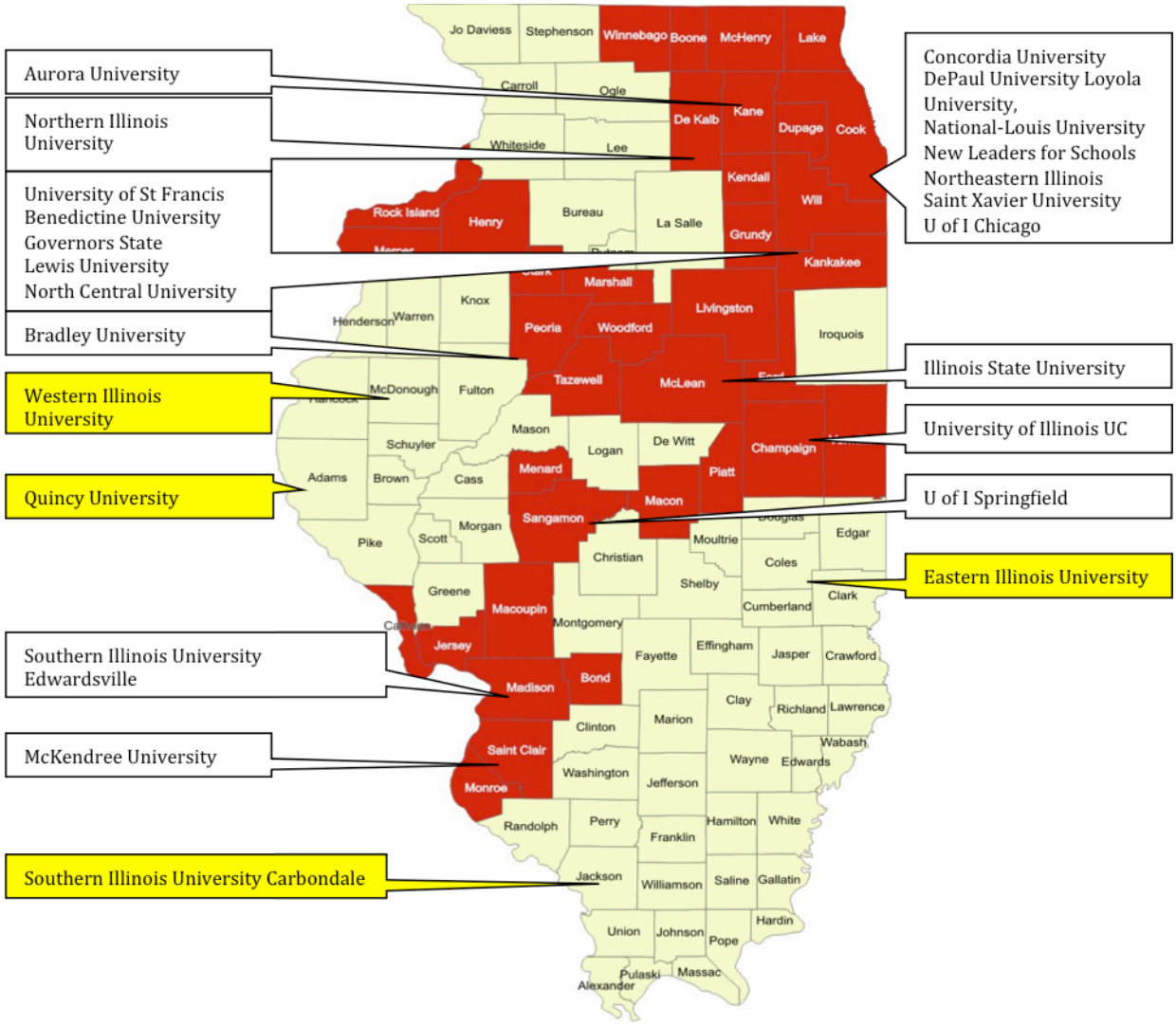

Figure 2. Distribution of institutions or entities with approved principal preparation programs in Illinois in October, 2013. Organization textbox tags are linked to the county where the organization is physically located. Light-shaded organization textbox tags denote organizations located in rural areas. (Illinois State Board of Education, *Directory of approved programs,* 2013).

Fifteen programs are approved to serve the greater metropolitan Chicago area, down from the previous approved number of 21. The 10 central and southern programs successfully reapplied for program approval and remain the same, leaving them primarily responsible for principal preparation in rural areas of Illinois.

Discussion

The new principal preparation legislation and rules present new challenges for schools and aspiring principals in rural Illinois. There are three specific access issues limiting opportunities for aspiring principals in rural areas. The first of these is the access to principal preparation programs in remote and rural areas. A decline in enrollment in principal preparation programs, driven in part by the large number of candidates who completed the program before the new rules went into effect, has impacted the ability to offer programs off-campus at satellite locations in rural or remote areas. Access to a qualifying internship site with a successful building principal, as required in the rules, may limit many candidates. As well, limited access to work with specific student populations during internship, such as students in English Language Learner (ELL) classes, is a challenge in many rural areas of Illinois. The new rules also create a challenging paradigm shift for persons who choose to work with interns, from being a supervisor to being a mentor. This new role creates an additional challenge, increased responsibilities associated with mentoring interns, that requires direct involvement with interns as they lead specific internships activities.

Limited Access

Distance. Aspiring leaders in rural areas may have limited access to principal preparation programs. Institutions in Illinois that serve rural areas have a history of delivering principal preparation programs to groups of candidates in isolated areas at a centrally located district or an independent satellite location as evening classes. These programs, situated in the midst of several rural communities, have been likely to attract several principal candidates from each of the surrounding schools or districts. With the current numbers of candidates in decline because of the influx of candidates completing principal preparation in advance of the new rules, institutions may not have the necessary number of students to make it financially feasible to deliver programs in rural areas. A brick and mortar campus as an only option is a time and distance obstacle. Given the locations of the limited number of approved programs in southern Illinois, the development of aspiring principals in this area of the state is almost non-existent.

Online program delivery is an option for rural candidates since the new principal program rules allow for a program to provide 50 percent or more of the program coursework online. There are, however, requirements. Program candidates must be observed by a tenure track faculty member "a minimum of two full days each semester, and for a minimum of 20 days throughout the length of the program" (Title 23, Section 30.50, 2014). This perhaps solves the distance issue for candidates, but creates administrative issues associated with creating predominantly online programs requiring reallocation of money and reprioritization of faculty time from face-to-face instruction to online instruction and travel.

Successful principals. Another factor limiting access to aspiring rural candidates is the rule that requires the principal of the internship site to have “two years of successful experience as a building principal as evidenced by relevant data, including

data supporting student growth in two of the principal's previous five years" (Title 23, Section 30.40, 2014). Many principals of rural schools with a high number of students from poverty face a significant academic achievement challenge. The effects of poverty are well-established as having a negative effect on student achievement (Marzano, 2004). Seven of lllinois' nine counties with the highest childhood poverty rates are rural and located in the far southern area of Illinois, with rates ranging from 27.2% to 49% (Social IMPACT Research Center, 2011). The districts in these seven counties report student low-income rates from 51.5% to 99.1% (Northern Illinois University, 2013). Of the 17 school districts in these seven counties, none is making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), an annual progress goal established for schools and districts (Northern Illinois University, 2013). Four districts have some of the highest low-income district percentages in this area and are identified as 10 Years in School Improvement, a U.S. AYP status. Under these circumstances, the determination of a successful building principal in our most at-risk rural school settings may well be an obstacle for aspiring principal candidates from these schools and districts. The critical need to develop leadership capacity of candidates from such districts is limited by whatever way a given principal preparation program interprets the state requirement that a mentor be "successful" at improving achievement.

Required experiences with specific populations. Opportunities related to required experiences in course field work and in the internship are limited for many in rural, remote districts of Illinois especially when they focus on instruction related for English Language Learners (ELL). Candidates from the southernmost rural counties of the state will have difficulty finding ELL teachers and schools with transitional bilingual programs. The problem is finding ELL populations in rural area schools that are being served by transitional bilingual programs. While Illinois' percentage increase of rural Hispanic students over a 10-year period from 1999 to 2009 was 437% (Strange, et al., 2012), this growth in rural Hispanic students is situated in specific areas and communities in Illinois and is not largely distributed throughout large rural areas. The majority of the state's ELL students are enrolled in districts in metropolitan counties near Chicago and Rock Island/Moline (Northern Illinois University, 2013). Yet, there are six districts scattered across five central counties with Hispanic enrollments that would require transitional bilingual programs (Northern Illinois University, 2013). School code in Illinois requires 20 or more children of limited English-speaking ability in an attendance center of a school district to have a transitional bilingual education program (Title 23, Section 228, 2013). There are only two districts among the 74 in southernmost rural Illinois counties that have a high enough district Hispanic enrollment that may require a transitional bilingual program (Northern Illinois University, 2013). Their location near the Illinois/Missouri border makes them an unlikely internship opportunity for candidates from districts several hours away. The central counties with Hispanic students and transitional programs would be too great a distance for a majority of interns from remote, rural districts in southern Illinois. Therefore, it will be very difficult to provide internship experiences with English language learners for candidates living in most of rural Illinois.

New Roles and Responsibilities: A Paradigm Shift

Another challenge is the paradigm shift that is presented in the new preparation rules with regard to the role of the mentor and the relationship between the mentor and the intern. New principal preparation rules are intentional in using the term mentor to identify the administrator who works with the intern. Being a mentor to an intern is quite different from being a supervisor of internship experiences. The shift represents moving from perceiving the principal as a manager to perceiving the principal as a school leader. In past practice, it was not unusual for principals to supervise several interns who were assigned a variety of administrative duties and logged hours performing them. Some of these duties were hours of supervising school activities, which, by today's rules, are not considered leadership activities. A purposeful shift has been made in the new rules requiring internship activities that are more focused on school improvement planning and instructional leadership. The rules are specific about the roles of the intern and mentor. The new rules "require the candidate to work directly with the mentor observing, participating in, and taking the lead in specific tasks…" (Title 23, Section 30.40, 2014). This language reflects the research on the value of quality mentoring provided "by professional practitioners who have the knowledge, time and commitment" (Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2007, p. 13) to model competencies, shape dispositions, and coach to reach potential. In larger districts, typically metropolitan districts, interns would have a choice of administrators who may qualify as a mentors, assistant principals, directors, coordinators, capable of fulfilling the new mentor role and/or being assigned by the mentor to work with the intern in this person's area of expertise. Rural administrators often perform multiple roles, superintendent/principal, multiple building principal, athletic director, or transportation director, making it possible that an intern at a rural school district would not have access to someone with the time and or capacity to mentor them.

In addition to the transition to an intensive, professional coaching relationship, there are greatly increased expectations for interns in the new rules. Over 30 specific leadership activities must be performed by the intern under the consultation of the mentor over a one- to two-year period. To measure performance on these authentic tasks, three, multi-item rubrics are used to assess the internship experience. The following rubric description for Meets the Standard, serves as an example of one internship requirement every intern must complete.

> The candidate presents to the school's leadership team a comprehensive examination of the progress made by the staff and principal toward the identified goals of the SIP. The presentation clearly explains the data used to analyze the impact of various interventions toward the goals identified in the SIP. The candidate's recommendations are based on an analysis of interventions implemented in support of the SIP, faculty input, and are aligned with the mission and vision of the school. The presentation focuses on the work of the staff and principal to attain improved and increased student achievement and demonstrates significant logical and

> practical improvements for future planning by the school's leadership team (Title 23, Section 30.APPENDIX A, 2014).

This example highlights the specificity of experiences a mentor and intern must engage in and suggests many hours of mentor and intern work are required for successful completion.

As noted previously, it is not unusual for building principals in many rural districts to wear many hats and perform many functions. Rural areas have some of the state's smallest district enrollments, and these small districts do not have multiple principals. As a result, 34% of the state's rural districts are served by persons in the dual role of superintendent and principal (Illinois State Board of Education, *Directory of educational entities,* 2013). If we look at the 23 most rural counties in southern Illinois, we find the largest concentration of rural districts, 74, compared to 40 in northern Illinois, 41 in western Illinois, and 32 in eastern Illinois. School leadership in far southern, rural Illinois counties is further strained by shared responsibilities. Of the 74 rural districts in southern Illinois, 20 districts employ a principal serving two or more schools designated as elementary, junior high, or high school, and 29 employ a superintendent who also serves as the principal for all schools in the district (Illinois State Board of Education, *Directory of educational entities,* 2013). Given these facts, the expectation that a superintendent/principal or a principal serving two or more schools be able to work directly with a principal candidate may be impractical. The number of prescribed internship experiences and their associated assessments may be more than school principals will want to add to their work load.

Finally, given the specificity of the internship requirements, the explicit expectations of the candidate taking the lead in these activities, may be implausible in small, rural districts. It may be a question of whether the mentor sees them as appropriate for his or her school at this point in time. As well, a common characteristic of rural school districts is having a school board who is informed and involved in the day-to-day priorities of its schools (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009, Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). In some rural districts, the prescribed internships activities may not be among the board's expectations. As a result, some principals and interns may be unwilling to expose themselves to these activities as they are not priority activities in the current school or district culture.

Similarly, the number of required internship experiences raises a question about how likely it would be for an intern to lead a collaborative activity in a school other than the one in which he or she works. In the 74 southernmost rural districts in Illinois, nearly half of them are elementary districts. This would require candidates to secure a mentor in a nearby unit or high school district to conduct internship experiences at that level. It would be a challenge to be accepted as a leader of activities in a district where you are not a stakeholder in the school or school community.

Recommendations

All Illinois students, regardless of where they may live in the state, deserve the best instructional leaders in their schools. The reform of principal preparation programs in

Illinois was overdue and necessary to meet ever-increasing demand to have the best instructional leaders to ensure that our students are meeting and exceeding state goals for academic achievement. However, the reform ignores rural demographics, failing to address principal preparation needs in vast areas of the state with a number of rural districts, creating a newly defined Forgottonia (Bibo, 2013) in Illinois. A reform agenda focused on building capacity in rural regions of the state in place of unwieldy policy that is a one-size-fits-all can be a solution.

When areas identified as metropolitan, suburban, cities, or towns are removed from the map, what remains is rural. The most likely candidates for sustained school leadership in rural Illinois are aspiring principal candidates from these vast rural areas. The unique characteristics of a rural area define for the inhabitants their sense of place (Bushnell, 1999; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). Sense of place in a rural area is what keeps someone there or what causes someone to leave and then to return. It is an attachment to a place, a relationship with a place. Howley et al. defined it as "aspirations for cherishing and cultivating their local communities…" (p. 151). Similarly Budge (2006) asserted, "…leadership of place is leadership that specifically aims to improve the quality of life in particular communities" (p. 8). Rural school leadership must be developed locally from among the people who cherish the community and want to improve the quality of life there. If a principal candidate is only interested in the position in a rural district to gain experience to move on, it is unlikely that principal will advocate for the academic achievement of the community's students for the long term. The cultivation of localized leadership talent is critical in rural areas.

Principal preparation programs designed to prepare principals for rural school leaders in other states have been successful because they were customized to rural needs. The Principals Excellence Program (PEP) in Pike County, Kentucky addressed the rural concerns of developing a cadre of well-prepared school leaders, of cultivating a commitment to stay in the rural area, and of increasing students' academic success (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005). The Oregon Leadership Network focused on developing school leaders trained with an emphasis on cultural competency to help all students succeed regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic differences ("What is the Oregon Leadership Network," 2014). The Northeast Leadership Academy instituted by North Carolina State University developed leaders in the state's rural, high-poverty districts with attention to rural context, specialized training, and weekly release time from teaching to practice leadership skills during the school day (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). The Rural Alaska Principal Preparation and Support Project delivered distance education and face-to-face coaching through a federally-funded five-year program to develop and sustain principals in rural Alaska (Rural Alaska, 2014). In all these examples, customized preparation and on-site support was essential.

Customized Principal Preparation Programs for Rural Illinois

When developing principal leadership and raising student achievement in rural areas of Illinois become a priority, a customized principal preparation program is necessary to reach most rural areas of the state. Such a program is quite different from preparation programs previously delivered on campus and at satellite sites. This means "more than

tinkering around the edges of the program or shuffling the metaphorical deck of cards" (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). A custom program for rural principal development requires many hours to develop online course work, recruitment plans, and marketing materials for possible district partnership. The program has to provide instruction through distance learning to bridge the distance from program sites to rural communities. Faculty skills must be honed in developing robust online instruction. The technology necessary for distance learning has to be supported by sustainable funding. On-site faculty supervision at the mentor/intern school throughout the program's coursework and the internship is imperative. Programs have to re-evaluate how faculty will use time that includes frequent trips to distant internship sites and full days of face-to-face collaboration with mentors and interns. Successful marketing can promote this kind of principal preparation program as one that develops leadership capacity, saves district resources of time and money, and provides sustained leadership. Illinois principal preparation programs that had previously reached remote, rural areas of the state through satellite programs, have curtailed their reach. Without a new vision for delivering programs or providing access to a program, remote, rural areas of the state will continue to be underserved.

Culturally Responsive Principal Preparation for Rural Illinois Schools

The new program rules require program and district partnerships, an effort to ensure that candidates were developed responsive to district needs. This partnership requirement has had limited reach into rural areas of Illinois because of limited numbers of candidates and distance. With a customized rural principal preparation program the primary objective of the program/district partnership, the joint approval and selection of promising principal candidates, culturally responsive to rural school needs, can be realized. A program preparation focus must be on developing leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are responsive to the culture of the rural schools. Whether these candidates come from within the district or not, a culturally responsive program takes into consideration developing leaders acquainted with challenges unique to rural schools. High poverty, low property values, and isolation are factors which impact the degree to which rural, remote schools are able to find and retain effective principals (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). As well, the culture of the community, its co-dependency with the school district, and the rural school board's close governance practices, require programs to prepare leaders for responding to rural stakeholders. A culturally responsive principal preparation program focuses on preparing leaders able to address these factors. It is possible that a principal preparation program developing principals in tune with the demands and expectations of rural schools, will see successful school leaders who will contribute to raising student achievement in rural schools of Illinois.

As Illinois has joined the nation's reform of principal preparation, so should Illinois follow initiatives of other states supporting principal preparation and development specific to rural areas. Illinois' best intentions for preparing highly effective school leaders must recognize and not forget the remote, rural areas of the state if Illinois truly expects "*…to improve teaching and learning and increase academic achievement and the development of all students*..." (emphasis in original) (Title 23, Section 30.20, 2014).

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