

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF A PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM AFTER PARTICIPATING IN PORTFOLIO DEFENSES*

Tony Armenta
Thomas DeVaney

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0[†]

Abstract

A major recommendation, or mandate in some cases, handed down to principal preparation programs from accrediting agencies, state certification departments, or other bodies, is to prominently include school districts in the program. This might include Advisory Councils that include public school administrators, involving districts in the selection of mentors for fieldwork experiences, or other such efforts. The authors' university has also included public school administrators in another, unique, way. After replacing the traditional, program-ending comprehensive exam with an oral portfolio defense, public school administrators were invited to participate on the defense panel. A focus group of administrators who participated as panel members was facilitated to determine their opinions on a number of questions related to program quality, the defense format itself, and the overall quality of candidates. The focus group provided meaningful information resulting in recommendations for making the program and the oral defense process even stronger.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration. In addition, this module is published in the **International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation**¹ Volume 3, Number 3.

*Version 1.2: Dec 4, 2008 4:21 pm -0600

[†]<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

¹<http://ijelp.expressacademic.org>

1 Introduction

A major recommendation, or mandate in some cases, handed down to principal preparation programs from accrediting agencies, state certification departments, or other bodies, is to prominently include school districts in the program. This might include Advisory Councils that include public school administrators, involving districts in the selection of mentors for fieldwork experiences, or other such efforts. The authors' university has also included public school administrators in another, unique, way.

After replacing the traditional, program-ending comprehensive exam with an oral portfolio defense, public school administrators were invited to participate on the defense panel. A focus group of administrators who participated as panel members was facilitated to determine their opinions on a number of questions related to program quality, the defense format itself, and the overall quality of candidates.

The focus group provided meaningful information resulting in recommendations for making the program and the oral defense process even stronger.

2 The Call for Collaboration

Recommendations and mandates for reforming principal preparation programs cite the need for collaboration between all stakeholders, primarily between universities and school districts. When universities in the authors' state of Louisiana were mandated to redesign principal preparation programs, collaboration was prominently mentioned in the guidelines set forth by the Louisiana Board of Regents.

Among things to be addressed in redesigned programs, universities were to "identify the diverse membership of the Redesign Team (e.g., College of Education, College of Business, community leaders, district personnel, school personnel, parents, etc.) and the process that was used for members to provide input as the educational leadership program was designed" (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2003, p. 18). Additionally, redesigned programs were to "identify other forms of collaboration that occurred as Redesign Team members gathered input and feedback about the program design from others," and to "discuss collaborative agreements that have been created to allow candidates to engage in problem-based learning experiences and be mentored by highly effective educational leaders within partner schools/districts [including] the process that will be used by universities and districts as collaboration occurs to improve the redesigned program once implemented" (p. 18).

Other sources also call for collaboration between universities and partner school districts. The Southern Region Education Board (SREB), in citing actions needed by states, universities and school districts, went so far as to recommend that states "require university-district partnership agreements" (SREB, 2007, p. 30). Capasso and Daresh (2001) in their book written for administrative interns, wrote that "the success of your internship will depend, in part, on the types of partnerships you generate with appropriate stakeholder groups in your sponsoring school district" (p. 26). Likewise, Mullen (2006) included an article written by Browne-Ferrigno and Muth in which they described an award-winning program at the University of Colorado that was "developed through partnerships with school districts" (pp. 275-295). In a book titled *Schools Can't Wait: Accelerating the Redesign of University Principal Preparation Programs*, SREB (2006) listed "University/district partnerships for principal preparation" as its "Core Condition #1" (p. 26). Hale and Moorman (2003) also cited the lack of collaboration between school districts and colleges and universities as being a major problem in the preparation of principals (p. 2).

The various calls for collaboration between universities and school districts recommend collaboration in areas such as the selection of students for the programs, development of the curriculum, development of fieldwork experiences, and evaluation of the interns' performance (Wallace Foundation, 2008). The authors' principal preparation program (hereafter referred to as "the program") heeded the call and has involved school districts in many ways. An Advisory Council of principals and district-level personnel was formed to assist in designing the curriculum, setting entrance requirements, setting mentor qualifications, and constructing meaningful fieldwork experiences.

Since SREB (2003) recommended that universities "base successful internship completion on achievement of leadership standards through mastery of performance tasks" (p. 30), the program eliminated the writ-

ten comprehensive examination, instead, requiring interns to complete a portfolio defense during the final semester of the program. It was decided that the defense of the portfolio include not just university faculty as evaluators, but school district personnel as well. This study attempted to determine to what extent, if any, school district personnel were positively or negatively influenced regarding program quality as a result of their participation as evaluators during candidates' portfolio defenses.

3 Portfolio Defense Requirements

The portfolio defense is the culminating experience to exit the program. The development of the portfolio begins during the first semester of coursework and continues throughout the program. During the first of the six seminars that make up the program, candidates are taught how to archive relevant artifacts and document fieldwork activities related to the standards of the Educational Leadership Constituent Consortium (ELCC) using the College's internet-based Pass-Port system. Candidates are also provided an html-based template to be used for the CD version of the final portfolio. Throughout the program, candidates can modify the template and create links to relevant artifacts. As the final semester of the program approaches, candidates select the best representations from their Pass-Port portfolio to include on the CD. During the final semester, candidates are taught how to create the final CD for the portfolio defense. This version of the portfolio also includes a narrated Power Point presentation that allows candidates to indicate the extent to which they have met the various ELCC standards. Two weeks before their scheduled defense, candidates are required to provide four copies of their final CD for distribution to faculty and district personnel who will be present at the defense.

4 Oral Defense Protocol

In advance of the portfolio defense date, members of the defense committee are given copies of the candidates' CDs to view so they can develop questions for the candidates. On the actual defense date, each candidate will answer questions before a panel of three faculty members and one school district representative. Each candidate's defense lasts approximately 45 minutes. Since members of the committee will have already viewed the candidate's CD, the candidate does not go through the Power Point presentation, but rather answers committee members' questions related to the CD's contents.

The committee's makeup includes a faculty member whose primary focus is research, two content-area faculty members, and a district representative who develops questions related to the application of the candidates' knowledge and skills as they relate to "real world" school leadership. Following each candidate's defense, the committee convenes to vote whether or not the candidate successfully passed. While the school district representatives provide feedback, they are non-voting members of the committee when it comes to deciding whether or not the candidate passed.

5 The Focus Group

The researchers were interested in determining the perceptions of the school district personnel after having participated as an oral defense committee member. A focus group consisting of the four school district representatives who participated in the Fall 2007 portfolio defenses was held in Spring 2008. During the focus group, the participants were asked to respond to the following six questions:

1. How did your participation in the portfolio defense affect, or alter, your impressions of the new leadership program?
2. If you were assigned to be an on-site mentor for a candidate during some portion of the program, would the experience of participating in the portfolio defense help in carrying out your mentor responsibilities?
3. As a result of seeing the portfolio defenses, what is your overall impression of the candidates?
4. As far as the portfolio itself, what recommendations or changes would you suggest (e.g., the content, layout, etc.)?
5. How could the department better prepare you for participation in the defense?

6. Based on your knowledge of, and experience with, the new program, do you think it more effectively prepares candidates for the current roles of school leaders than the traditional program through which you received certification?

The focus group session was audio-recorded, with participant permission, in order to make an accurate transcription of their comments.

6 Findings

Question 1: How did your participation in the portfolio defense affect, or alter, your impressions of the new leadership program?

There was consensus that by participating on the portfolio defense committee the district personnel had a more thorough knowledge of what the program entailed, but also had a great deal of respect for the quality of the program. Some of the pertinent quotes included:

- I really had no idea how extensive the program was, so it really impressed me to see how much detail went into the preparation and the planning, and even the portfolio defense. I was impressed that these participants had to have a pretty good knowledge of what they produced. I felt that the students really had an understanding of what they presented, having to defend it in front of an entire panel of educators. So, it changed my overall perspective of what was involved.
- I was glad to see the emphasis on the hands-on, practical aspects of the program. I think it's a step in the right direction.
- It allowed me to understand the program, because I didn't know what the classes were and the sequence to get a degree; I wasn't aware exactly of what they had to do. When I went through the (old) program, it wasn't as a cohort, so I got to see those people develop as a group.
- In looking at their portfolios, at different aspects of everything they'd done, that was really good to see. That allowed me to see that they had to do this first, and then this, to end up at the point where they finally defended their portfolio.
- I was really pleased that you could tell distinctly that the candidates had participated fully in the activities that were encouraged or stipulated by the educational leadership program. With these candidates you could tell they were placed in positions where they actually had to have a finished product. I think that's a real key piece, that they can't just "go through the motions"; they have to be 100% involved in those programs.

Question 2: If you were assigned to be an on-site mentor for a candidate during some portion of the program, would the experience of participating in the portfolio defense help in carrying out your mentor responsibilities?

As in Question 1, the focus group was unanimous in its opinion that they would do a better job mentoring a candidate after having participated in the portfolio defense. Sample responses include:

- I think that I can do a far better job now working with a mentee than before. The first two candidates that I worked with, I felt lost; I wasn't quite sure if I was headed in the right direction or giving them the right support they needed. Now, seeing what the final product is going to look like, the final purpose, I feel like I can guide them and play the role of mentor...bringing them in, having a lot more meaningful conversations, opening up to them more and having them open up to me, sharing some of my experiences. I'm really looking forward to this next go-round.
- Now that I know what they're going to have to do in the end (portfolio defense) and what the requirements are for the program, I will feel more comfortable sitting down with them in my office and having a similar type of dialogue like we did in the defense. The defense was primarily a question and answer activity. I think everyone felt comfortable. I think with that end in mind, as you're working with them, you can think of questions in the end that they'll be asked.

Question 3: As a result of seeing the portfolio defenses, what is your overall impression of the candidates?

While there was also a consensus regarding the strength of the candidates, at least one focus group member observed that varied types of strengths surfaced. For example, some of the more technologically-astute candidates were able to include more “bells and whistles” on their CD, while other candidates had more substantive content. Some of the focus group responses included:

- I think there was a lot of quality there, because the program, from what I’ve seen, weeds out the weaker, or maybe the candidates who aren’t going to be successful. It’s not a program that you just sign up for anymore, so I think you’re starting out with better quality. I did notice that through the portfolio defense you could see weaknesses and strengths, so I was kind of excited about that, because everyone, to me, looked the same on paper. But when you have to do a face-to-face defense and you have to sell your product and sell yourself, you can’t hide behind that. So, I was convinced the candidates were high quality, but even at that level I could tell the difference that some were at different levels.
- I think the whole process of the defense, for them, was helpful. It’s like you’re talking through your experiences and your strengths and weaknesses. I don’t know if it’s the first time the person realized it, but in one of our cases, it’s like she all of a sudden realized that she shouldn’t be a principal, that she didn’t really know if this was for her. But we didn’t come to that conclusion; she did, as she talked about being the leader and the difficulty she had when she learned about herself. I think that’s important, that you find that out before you get into a position. And if this program can help do that, I think that’s good. And the strengths she did identify are things she’ll be able to use in another position.
- I think it was a good exercise in articulating their visions, their expectations of things to come; it gave them a good opportunity to reflect. Just preparing for the portfolio defense helped them to look at all the things that they’d done throughout their degree program and I think that’s going to make them stronger persons in the school system because they’ve had a chance to reflect and perhaps decide that there are some areas I do need to work on.
- I wish there had been an opportunity for candidates to look at each others’ portfolios, because there were some strong differences. It wasn’t just the ones who were strong technology people, but the content of what some of them put (in the portfolio).
- I also think the reflection was important. They were able to show and reflect on all the varied experiences and what they’ve learned, whether during their internship they were doing small tedious things or really having to jump in there and work with a school on large, school improvement efforts.

Question 4: As far as the portfolio itself, what recommendations or changes would you suggest (e.g., the content, layout, etc.)?

Since the portfolio defense is new, the researchers wanted to assess what improvements could be made. One participant said she enjoyed hearing the voice of the candidate as the candidate “walked us through” the portfolio. Other members of the group also provided important input and suggestions, including:

- Sometimes I had to hunt for some things, but not for others. Perhaps a consistent template is needed.
- As the end user, I had some difficulty. There were some things that I couldn’t find that I really wanted to see.
- Actually, some of the links didn’t work. I don’t know if there could be a test beforehand to try it out, perhaps a point system to make that part of the rubric, so that if the links don’t work, you’d lose some points.
- Sometimes the technology mistakes might override the quality of what they’ve done because of difficulty navigating the portfolio for the end user.
- Maybe they could switch CDs with someone else to see if it will work on another computer.
- I enjoyed hearing their voices; I think that was important to hear them talk about their experiences.
- If I were an aspiring principal, I would keep that CD, because if they are applying to a school system, it would certainly be beneficial. It would give the school system insight into all the activities they had done.

Question 5: How could the department better prepare you for participation in the defense?

All focus group members made some valuable recommendations regarding what the department could do to prepare a district representative for their role in the portfolio defense. It was pointed out that, other than being given the CDs, no specific instructions or rubrics were distributed which would have clarified their roles. Additionally, the practitioners were unclear what types of questions they should ask and from what perspective to view the CDs. Some of the more pertinent comments included:

- I would like to see the questions be consistent for each candidate. I think it would be more equitable if we asked the same questions of all the candidates, because they're all doing basically the same thing. I was sometimes at a loss as to what I was going to ask next.
- It depends on who the mentors or district people are. If you use the same people over and over, they will pretty much have an idea of what types of questions they should ask. But, if you bring in different mentors each time, they might have to have some training in what is expected with respect to the questions they might ask.
- It would be nice to have rubrics so we'd know what types of things the students are being judged on.

Question 6: Based on your knowledge of, and experience with, the new program, do you think it more effectively prepares candidates for the current roles of school leaders than the traditional program through which you received certification?

Finally, since all of the focus group members had received their degrees and/or administrative certification through a traditional program, the researchers wanted to assess their opinions related to the new, redesigned program structure compared to the more traditional course-driven programs. The participants were unanimous in their praise for the new program. They particularly appreciated the fact that the new program, while still teaching some theory, focused on practical, field-based experiences. The participants said the current candidates are learning things in the program that the practitioners didn't learn until they were on the job. The consensus was that the new program design was much superior to the more traditional programs through which the practitioners received their certification. The following comments are representative of how the practicing administrators answered the question:

- Absolutely. And I think I got a good program; everything worked fine for me. I had a good leader above me who gave me opportunities to get involved and to take ownership of certain tasks, but not everyone has that situation. As a matter of fact, very few have that situation. So, this guarantees that the new candidates will get real-world experience, be able to take ownership, and begin to believe in themselves. I think these people are going to be far better prepared for multiple tasks and multiple situations.
- I think the educational leadership program definitely helps prepare today's principal. This new program has a consistency that builds from semester to semester until they finally achieve that higher level. In every semester in every seminar are hands-on activities. I think that's such a key factor. I've already talked to our Human Resources people with my hopes that people with this kind of experience get more credit when being considered for an opening than someone who was trained in some other manner. It's going to give us better qualified administrators. This program is going to better prepare school leaders than the old traditional programs.
- If you really want to go to the next level, you might consider a "money back guarantee" to districts that hire your candidates. That way, you can say, "These are guaranteed quality candidates."
- I would have to say they would have enough skills to be effective. It's going to be a rough transition, whenever you start a new job, but I believe they have the tools that are necessary, and the mindset.
- Two out of the three candidates I saw could go into a principalship right away, but they were already serving in an administrative-type capacity. The internship in this new program is more like being an assistant principal because it's longer and it's more in-depth. This new program allows them to experience so many things and have so many opportunities that weren't available in the traditional program I went through.
- I promise you the product you're giving us is much better than we ever had, or hoped to have.

- With this program, candidates are placed in different schools throughout the program and that helps them develop that network of administrators they can call on for support when they get their first job. They also have their other cohort members on whom they can call.
- I can't understand why the state is pushing the fast-track programs. It's unfair to the students and it's unfair to the school systems that might hire them.

7 Recommendations

The researchers, by initiating the focus group, demonstrated yet another way for the principal preparation program to collaborate with practitioners, something emphasized in the literature cited earlier. As a result of the input received from the district personnel who participated, the researchers make the following recommendations:

1. Involve school district personnel in whatever culminating experience you have for your candidates, particularly if it is in the form of a presentation (e.g., portfolio defense).
2. If you use a type of oral presentation as the culminating experience, determine if it is just a "showcase" for demonstration purposes or if it will actually be used to assess if a student should successfully complete the program.
3. If the defense is to be used for "pass-fail" purposes, construct a well-designed rubric that objectively determines whether or not candidates have met specified standards. This is extremely important since candidates have made it to the final semester seemingly being successful in prior coursework.
4. Let committee members know in advance exactly what their roles are. For district personnel, they should know what line of questioning is expected (e.g., applying standards to "real-life" school leadership functions).
5. Use different school district people each semester so a more in-depth knowledge of the program reaches a wider audience of school district personnel.
6. Keep student reflections part of the portfolio presentation.

If student-prepared CDs or other media are to be used:

1. Attempt to get CDs or other materials to committee members as early as possible to ensure they have adequate time to examine the materials.
2. Use a template for CDs to ensure uniformity of the presentations.
3. Encourage candidates to share their CDs, not just for comparison, but to ensure that the CDs will play on different computers.
4. Make an audio narrative a requirement for the media presentation.

8 References

Capasso, R. L., & Daresh, J. C. (2001). *The school administrator internship handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Hale, E. & Moorman, H. (September, 2003). *Preparing school principals: A national perspective on policy and program innovations*. Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, D.C. and Illinois Education Research Council, Edwardsville, IL.

Louisiana Board of Regents, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, & The Professional Development Leadership Advisory Council. (2003). *Guidelines for the redesign of post-baccalaureate education programs*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Board of Regents.

Mullen, C. A. (Ed.). (2006). *Mentoring and tutoring: Partnership in learning*. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis.

Southern Regional Education Board. (2003). Good principals are the key to successful schools: Six strategies to prepare more good principals. Atlanta, GA: Southern Region Education Board. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED478010)

Southern Regional Education Board. (2006). Schools can't wait: Accelerating the redesign of university principal preparation programs. Atlanta, GA.

Southern Regional Education Board. (2007). Good principals aren't born — They're mentored: Are we investing enough to get the school leaders we need? Atlanta, GA.

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