

# Preparing Urban Educational Leaders: A Collaborative Community Model

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## Abstract

*The Educational Leadership program at a small liberal arts university serving a large urban district and surrounding regions has been redesigned to reflect state and national standards. In order to give students a unique setting in which to build community as well as practice leadership and coaching skills, candidates work in a cohort and fieldwork is embedded within each course. This research studies the effect of the cohort model and fieldwork designed specifically to provide skills needed by today's school leaders.*

## The Context

This research provided a procedural account and the student outcomes of a newly designed educational leadership program at a small liberal arts university which serves a large region across two counties in Southern California. Students in the leadership program come from a broad background of work experiences. A number of administrative candidates work in urban schools in the heart of a major metropolitan city with students from very low socio-economic backgrounds. Some candidates work in neighborhoods surrounding the university, which are predominantly filled with middle and upper class families. Other future school leaders work in nearby regions that are made up of largely agricultural farmland.

One of approximately one hundred and thirty colleges and universities in California, the university was founded in 1959; enrollment includes 1,800 undergraduates as well as 1,000 graduate students in the School of Education and the School of Business. The mission of the university is to educate leaders for a global society who are strong in character and judgment, confident in their identity and vocation, and committed to service and justice. This mission is exemplified in the conceptual framework of the School of Education, which calls for graduates to:

- Serve as mentors and models for moral and ethical leadership
- Think critically to connect theory with practice
- Respect all individuals
- Include and respond to the needs of all learners
- Value diversity
- Empower individuals to participate in educational growth and change

Coursework is built around these tenets and is evident in the reflective strands running throughout the program. Classes are relatively small and the university has enjoyed a reputation of quality programs and giving personalized attention to each student.

## **The Preparation Program**

The program in Educational Leadership was designed to reflect the national guidelines established by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (1998) (ISLLC) and the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2002) (CPSELs). These standards have become the basis on which leadership preparation programs in California are developed. The standards include: 1) promoting the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community; 2) promoting the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; 3) promoting the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; 4) promoting the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources; 5) promoting the success of all students by modeling a personal code of ethics and developing professional leadership capacity; and, 6) promoting the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

There are multiple paths to the principalship in the state of California. Along with the traditional university coursework route, there are other means including local district and county office programs as well as the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA), which grants the Preliminary Administrative Services Tier I credential based on passage of the test.

Completion of the university program grants the Preliminary Administrative Services Tier I credential and a Master's Degree with a choice of specialization in four areas: school site leadership, teacher leadership, leadership in reading, or leadership in technology. The program was also designed to be true to the values and stated goals of a liberal arts university while also reflecting the needs identified in the communities and school districts of the surrounding area. These include a focus on student achievement, working with diverse communities, integration of reflective practice, and an emphasis on developing a personal philosophy and vision of teaching and learning.

The educational leadership program was redesigned in 2004 to better reflect the California Standards for Professional Educational Leaders (CPSELs). From questionnaire results, interviews with administrators from the districts we serve, and findings from research on the preparation of school leaders, new courses were developed. The program, structured in a cohort model, provides opportunities for candidates to practice the work of school leaders while learning in a caring environment supported by university faculty and school supervisors. Embedded within the coursework are assignments that promote active, authentic learning on the journey towards becoming a school leader. In addition to the embedded fieldwork, faculty worked with the superintendent from a local school district to design Leadership Training Centers. Leadership Training Centers (LTCs) are sites selected specifically for the quality leadership abilities of the principal. Candidates work in groups of five or six with a designated LPC principal to complete one capstone project per semester.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The business of school leadership has become increasingly complex over the past decade. Numerous reforms, testing and accountability, demographic changes, decentralization, and

globalization are just a few of the complicated shifts educators have endured over the past two decades. The pressures on institutions of higher learning and education in general can be linked to broader political, social, and economic movements that operate globally as well as locally (Apple, 2000; Bubles & Torres, 2000).

The principalship has become a much more difficult job and we must prepare our candidates to face the challenges they will be given. One of these challenges is building a learning community within their schools. Learning communities come together to create shared purpose, develop shared knowledge, and work together on creative solutions to complex problems (Fenning, 2004). The cohort model provides for a learning community amongst candidates and supports them in their growth towards becoming an educational leader. Students engaged in a collaborative learning community are more likely to foster those same conditions within their professional environments (McPhail, 2000; Teitel, 1997; Wesson, 1996). Candidates in a cohort model are also more likely to show growth in the areas of collaboration and reflective practice (Hatley, 1996).

New administrators must quickly assimilate into the culture of their schools (Lashway, 2003). By embedding fieldwork experiences into the coursework, candidates get leadership training in context and the opportunity to practice those skills while still being supported by university faculty and practicing site supervisors. The hosting of collaborative and meaningful internship experiences directly supports leadership development (Lashway, 2003; Wilmore, et al, 1999).

Since the advent of the Levine report (2005), several studies have discussed promising leadership preparation practices. Orr's study (2006) as well as the initial findings of the Darling-Hammond and Hunt-Davis' (2006) work on behalf of the Wallace Foundation found that quality leadership preparation programs include a strong university-school district relationship, a mentoring component, the use of a cohort structure, and are research-based with a strong curricular coherence. These components are all implemented within the leadership program being studied.

## **Methodology**

This research project was qualitative in nature. Master's students, enrolled in an educational leadership program, worked together in a cohort model. Coursework was specifically designed to model collaboration and provide contextual experiences in which candidates had the opportunity to practice leadership skills in a school setting. All fieldwork experiences were based on helping students meet the CPSEL standards. Instrumentation included use of an electronic questionnaire and students were surveyed in class upon completion of coursework for the Preliminary Tier I Administrative Services Credential.

Data from the first cohort was collected in December. Candidates in the second cohort were surveyed in March. Additional data was collected through narrative journal reflections, researcher-student conferences, individual interviews, e-mails and other samples of student work pertaining to meeting the CPSELs.

## Initial Findings

*A collaborative community:* Content analysis of data found that the cohort model provided a sense of community and supported candidates as they moved through the program. When candidates were asked to respond to membership in cohort, the responses were overwhelming positive: “[A strength of the cohort was] working closely with classmates...creating strong educational bonds with educators from surrounding school districts.” Another candidate noted, “I enjoyed getting to know the other professionals in the cohort. They inspired me and supported me.” Other responses supported the cohort model in observing the phenomena of relationship building. “Being in a cohort allows students in the program to build relationships and to benefit from each other’s unique experiences in education. I like the fact that we are not having to re-introduce ourselves to new people each semester. I honestly cannot think of a downside to cohorts...” was the response from one candidate. Another noted, “Great networking happened. It has been helpful to have the sense of family and know they are there when the need arises.” It was also mentioned that members of the cohorts had established relationships that would continue into their administrative careers: “You really get to know the other cohort members, developing relationships where we trust one another. Also, [the cohort model] sets up opportunities for long-term professional relationships.”

*Authentic leadership experiences:* An innovative component of the program embeds fieldwork into the coursework. The candidates complete assignments in each course that are tied to the standards and provide experience in the work that leaders do, such as using data to inform instructional practice, working with teachers to develop curriculum, and working with various community constituents. Candidates replying to the questionnaire reported that the embedded fieldwork was a valuable component of the educational leadership program. “The fieldwork and projects afford the students an opportunity to explore all of the other areas of educational management that one does not see as a teacher, and to gain some experience in administrative roles.” Additional comments included, “[A strength of program is] the ability to include fieldwork assignments in coursework.” It was also noted that the embedded fieldwork assisted candidates in the transition from classroom teacher to school leader. “The fieldwork helped change my mindset towards a direction of leadership and not just course completion.”

*Leadership Training Centers:* The Leadership Training Centers (LTCS) were developed to give candidates the opportunity to work outside of their district with principals recognized for their excellent leadership skills. Groups of five or six candidates worked with one of three principals each semester on capstone assignments. As reported by instructors, candidates noted the value of the LTCs in class discussions. When asked to give feedback on the LTC projects, candidates noted the importance of this experience. “I enjoyed this project and learned a lot about K-8 schools. Fieldwork at the schools is a viable part of the program that provides students with real-life experiences.” Another candidate noted, “I loved the LTC project; great discussion/facilitation and excellent groundwork for theory.”

*Readiness for leadership roles:* This program was designed to prepare leaders for schools and assist their readiness in becoming a principal. One hundred percent of the respondents to the class questionnaire responded that they were “prepared or very prepared” to take a position in educational leadership. In addition, 91% of the candidates reported the coursework and

experiences in the educational leadership program have prepared them well to take on leadership positions. Candidates also answered, with 91% in agreement, that the embedded fieldwork assignments were appropriate and helpful in meeting the goals of the leadership program.

### **Areas for Further Study and Consideration**

Initial findings show that the cohort model supports students in building relationships that they expect to continue throughout their leadership careers. Deep professional bonding occurred in relationships developed among cohorts members as well as across district and grade-level boundaries. Candidates in the program were able to participate in authentic leadership experiences, which assisted them in the transition towards a more broad view of leadership. All candidates surveyed reported they were prepared to take on leadership roles in schools.

This study reported initial findings of an innovative principal preparation program. As part of ongoing data collection, members of future cohorts will be surveyed and data will be used to inform program revisions in order to meet the needs of future leaders. Areas of future study include the impact of marketplace forces on university preparation programs as well as the factors that promote collaborative learning experiences that assist future administrators in a smoother transition to a school leadership position.

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