

A Student Suggested Redesign of a Principal Preparation Program

Claudio Salinas
Texas A&M International University

Abstract

Graduate students in a practicum class participated in a survey on changes they would make to the present principal preparation program they were about to finish. The survey of their anonymously secured responses was set into a questionnaire encompassing the range of their ideas. This questionnaire was then presented to these students to access their agreement or disagreement with the range of items in the instrument. Surprisingly, their set of responses was very much in agreement with certain recommendations recently made by the Southern Regional Education Board.

The idea of improving principal preparation programs has been a matter of concern for many sectors of our society for some time (Creighton, 2002; Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth, 1988). Of recent note are reform suggestions from foundations and professional organizations (Achilles, 2003; Creighton, 2003; McCarthy, 1998; Murphy, 1999; & Young, 2004). One sector whose voice has not been too readily evident in the literature is that of students in principal preparation programs.

This paper describes a program redesign generated as an exercise with graduate students in a traditional principal preparation program at a university in South Texas. Their design was then compared and contrasted with strategies for principal preparation program change proposed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and similar recommendations from other critics.

The SREB proposed six strategies for producing good principals (O'Neill, K., Fry, B., Hill, D., & Bottoms, G., 2003). The first strategy calls for the selection of promising candidates with a high aptitude as a leader. The second strategy calls for restructuring university courses and field-based learning such that the highest priority is the production of principals who can lead schools to excellence in student achievement. The next strategy is for programs to incorporate field-based practice throughout the preparation program so that candidates engage in real instructional leadership activities under the supervision of expert mentors. Strategy number four calls for principal licensure (certification) to be linked to a school leader's demonstrated ability to improve school performance. The fifth strategy calls for the creation of alternative certification programs for principal candidates who are proven leaders as teachers in raising student achievement and have a master's degree. And the last strategy calls for the creation of state leadership academies to cultivate leadership teams for assisting middle-tier schools and for the grooming of team leaders to become school leaders.

Similar suggestions for change have come from other critics. On the topic of selection of prospective program candidates, including recruitment, the concerns and

recommendations by others were on the same theme. The effectiveness of the preparation programs is partly due to the quality of entering candidates. Therefore, select and recruit high ability candidates (Erlandson, 1997; Murphy, 1999; Creighton, 2003; Hale & Moorman, 2003). In the same manner, others also call for the recalibration of the principal preparation programs to produce principals that can make a difference and raise student achievement (Erlandson, 1997; Murphy, 1999; McCarthy, 1999). And, similarly, other critics also call for more emphasis on real world training (Erlandson, 1997; Martin, Ford, Murphy, & Muth, 1998; Holifield & Dickinson, 1998; Hale & Moorman, 2003).

This study arose as a point of curiosity as to what recommendations graduate students in a practicum class, which is close to the end of their principal preparation program, had of the program design at this university in South Texas. No such survey was known to have been done before with these students or their predecessors and this university had just been accepted to participate in a Lighthouse Initiative of the Texas Principal Preparation Network (TPPN). Participants in the Lighthouse Initiative engage in a critical review of the content and delivery of their principal preparation programs.

Two research questions guided this study: (a) What changes would students suggest be made to the present principal preparation program to better meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind legislation? and (b) How do these changes compare to recommendations found in a recent SREB report?

Methodology

The students in this class represented a convenience group. Most were members of a cohort and had just participated in an educational conference, held locally, in which the main theme was meeting the challenges of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. A good portion of this group had presented papers at this conference. The class consisted of 31 students.

These students were asked to respond anonymously in writing to two questions: (a) In light of expectations coming as a result of NCLB, what do you envision is expected of a "high-performing principal?" and (b) If leadership begins with an effective school principal that can lead school improvement and raise student achievement, how would you redesign the principal preparation program to assure a supply of "high-performing principals?"

Thirty-one students participated in the generation of individual change recommendations anonymously. A list was formed from the variety of responses that had been submitted. This list was further re-grouped into different sets of categories as a new questionnaire with the assistance of a number of graduate students.

The new questionnaire was then submitted to the original set of students to check for the extent of their agreement or disagreement (Likert Scale). Twenty-five of the original 31 students (80.6%) were able to participate in the new questionnaire response portion of the study. Their responses were tabulated as frequency responses. In addition, these latter results were then compared and contrasted with the strategies for producing good principals produced by the SREB.

Results and Findings

The tabulation of the frequency responses to the new questionnaire are shown in Table 1. The first category contained item 1 and it had 75% agreement among the

participants. The second category contained items 2-13. The range of agreement among the students was from 50% to 92.8%.

The students were 50% in agreement on moving the ILD class to an earlier spot in the sequence of courses and also in having the professional paper design revisited. They were most interested in being kept abreast of the latest educational legislation (100%), keeping the class sizes small (92.8%), and being reminded of how students learn and how to teach to the diversity of the students (92.8%).

Table 1

Tabulation of Student Responses of Categorized Questionnaire

Category/Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Entry Standards			
1. Set high standards	3	3	21 (75%)
Classes			
2. Keep classes small	0	2	26 (92.8%)
3. Keep class load at 6 hrs.	5	4	19 (67.8%)
4. Extend Law Class	7	4	17 (60.7%)
5. Attend Board meetings	0	3	25 (89.3%)
6. Combine Supervision and Principalship	4	6	18 (64.3%)
7. Sequence supervision classes closely	2	3	23 (82.1%)
8. Move ILD class earlier	2	8	14 (50%)
9. On-site visits are good	1	2	25 (89.3%)
10. No book reports in Practicum	0	4	24 (85.7%)
11. Restructure professional paper	2	12	14 (50%)
12. Latest legislation updates	0	0	28 (100%)
13. Reminder on learning	0	2	26 (92.8%)
Additions to Coursework			
14. More "hands-on" work	0	2	26 (92.8%)
15. Dealing w/parents/community	3	7	18 (64.3%)
16. Action-based research	1	5	22 (78.6%)
17. Research-based presentations	1	5	22 (78.6%)
18. More problem-solving with critical analysis	0	2	26 (92.8%)
19. Closing achievement studies	1	5	22 (78.6%)
20. Future trends studies	1	9	18 (64.3%)
21. Align portfolio work	0	4	24 (85.7%)
Expansion of Field-Based Experience			
22. Program-long field practice	0	2	26 (92.8%)
23. Train supervising administrator	1	5	22 (78.6%)
24. Gradual participation in field	0	4	22 (78.6%)
25. Work with school leaders	1	2	25 (89.3%)
26. Connect theory and practice	0	2	26 (92.8%)
27. Keep journals/reflections	3	12	13 (46.4%)
Technology			
28. More on technology programs for impacting students Induction Program	1	9	18 (64.3%)

29. Work pro bono at school	0	2	26 (92.8%)
30. Clear list of activities	1	1	26 (92.8%)
31. Work with leadership team	1	1	26 (92.8%)
Symposia			
32. Successful administrators	1	4	23 (82.1%)
33. Closing achievement gap	0	1	27 (96.4%)
34. Discuss real life situations	2	1	25 (89.3%)
Other			
35. Human Resources Manag.	1	3	24 (85.7%)
36. Counseling & legislation	1	4	23 (82.1%)
37. Interviews/Interviewing	1	8	19 (67.8%)
38. Pay Program on Plan	0	7	21 (75%)
39. Job Fair	0	1	27 (96.4%)
40. More exposure to conferences	0	1	27 (96.4%)

The next category contained items 14-21. The students were least in agreement (64.3%) in having additional coursework in dealing with parents and community members and, also, in studying more about future trends.

They were most in agreement (92.8%) in wanting more “hands-on” work such as found in schools like the budget and interviewing. Similarly, they wanted more problem-solving activities with follow-up analysis of the solutions.

Items 22-27 were found in the category of field-based experience. The students were in least agreement (46.4%) in keeping a journal of their reflections on the different experiences. They were in highest agreement (92.8%) in asking for field-experience throughout the duration of the preparation program and, also, to having these practices reflect the knowledge studied in class. Another point of interest was that they (78.6%) wanted school administrators serving as supervisors during their field-practice to have training as mentors. They (78.6%) wanted a gradual progression of participation in the field experience. And they (89.3%) wanted to eventually work with the school administrators at their place of field-experience in investigating achievement gaps and to work in resolving identified problems.

In the category of Technology, there was one item and 64.3% of the students were on agreement here. Induction, the next category, contained items 29-31. Students were in equal agreement (92.8%) on the three items.

They seek a clear set of expectations and activities for the student candidates when at their field practice, to be part of the a school’s leadership and problem-solving team, and to have an opportunity to work pro-bono to obtain real experience.

Another category, symposia, had similar results to the previous one. They seek (82.1%) to have successful school administrators to share of their experiences with them at seminar type settings; to discuss real life situations (89.3%) at schools; and to have them share practices (96.4%) for closing achievement gaps.

And the last category contained a mixture of items. The students were especially interested (96.4%) in more conference type experiences and job fair (6.4%) opportunities.

They also noted an interest in Human Resource management (50%), Counseling (82.1%), and Interviews (67.8%).

Then the above results were compared and contrasted against the strategies suggested by SREB. A comparison of the item (1) about who is to gain entry into the program reveals that 75% of the students want the best to get in. This was quite in accord with the SREB strategy. Most of the items contained as items 2-34 assert a wish to have a revision of different aspects of the current perceived deployment of the program. Most were agreed upon by at least 50% of the participants. This, too, is in agreement with the SREB strategy to recalibrate preparation programs. And then the items that reference a desire to extend the field experience, 22-26 and 29-31, assert at a minimum of 65% agreement on calling for this. This is in agreement with the emphasis of real-world training by the SREB.

The immediate comparison of the suggestions made by the students is that they were very much in line with most strategies suggested by SREB and similar critics. The students were not cognizant of the SREB report.

The students were unaware of the SREB report and did not address strategies 4, 5, and 6 of that report.

Conclusion

The students had plenty to share about how a traditional preparation program can look at itself and improve itself from the perspective of out-going students. Their suggestions were extensive. They also hit the target in terms of the SREB strategies applicable to their areas of concern. Their program redesign was very much like the first three strategies made by the SREB and similar critics.

It remains to see how this information and other similar information can impact this program once it takes a look at itself. The contribution made by the students has got to be brought into consideration along with input from other sources, such as the schools that assist this program. It is all a partnership and all the players have to be involved in proposed changes. Their suggestions are bound to be a part of the program's self-study.

References

- Achilles, C. M. (2003, August). Change the damn box. The 2003 Walter Dewey Cocking Lecture. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Sedona, AZ.
- Creighton, T. (2002, Summer). Toward a leadership practice field: An antidote to an ailing internship experience. *The AASA Professor*, 25(3), 3-10.
- Creighton, T. (2003, August). It's time to take back our profession. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Sedona, AZ.
- Edirisooriya, G. (1998). Why we need to strengthen graduate training in educational administration. In R. Muth and M. Martin (Eds.).
Toward the year 2000: Leadership for Quality Schools. The Sixth Yearbook of NCPEA. Lancaster, PA: Technomic, 268-277.
- Erlandson, D. (1997). Principals for the schools of Texas: A seamless web of professional development. Fort Worth: Sid W. Richardson Foundation.
- Griffiths, D., Stout, R., & Forsyth, P. (Eds.). (1988). *Leaders for America's Schools*. Berkeley, CA: McCuthcheon.
- Hale, E., & Moorman, H. (2003). Preparing school principals: A national perspective on policy and program innovations. Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, DC and Illinois Education Research Council, Edwardsville, IL.
- Holifield, M., & Dickinson, G. (1998). Authenticity in field-based preparation programs for school administrators. In R. Muth and M. Martin (Eds.). *Toward the year 2000: Leadership for Quality Schools*. The Sixth Yearbook of NCPEA. Lancaster, PA: Technomic, 299-306.
- Martin, W., Ford, S., Murphy, M., & Muth, R. (1998). Partnerships for preparing school leaders: Possibilities and practicalities. In R. Muth and M. Martin (Eds.). *Toward the year 2000: Leadership for Quality Schools*. The Sixth Yearbook of NCPEA. Lancaster, PA: Technomic, 238-246.
- McCarthy, M. (1998). The "new" educational leadership professor. In R. Muth and M. Martin (Eds.). *Toward the year 2000: Leadership for Quality Schools*. The Sixth Yearbook of NCPEA. Lancaster, PA: Technomic, 3-15.
- Murphy, J. (1999). *The quest for a center: Notes on the state of the profession of educational leadership*. Columbia, MO: The University Council for Educational Administration.
- O'Neill, K., Fry, B., Hill, D., & Bottoms, G. (2003). *Good principals are the key to successful schools: Six strategies to prepare more good principals*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Young, M. D. (2004, January). Reorienting the preparation of school and school system leaders. Paper presented at a meeting of the Texas Principal Preparation Network's Lighthouse Initiative, Austin, TX.