



Alternative and Conventional Certification for Education Administrators: A Look at the Debate

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As schools and districts attempt to raise student achievement by enacting education reforms, increased attention is being given to the preparation and qualifications of the principals and superintendents leading these efforts. Educators and policymakers across the nation are debating the merits of alternative vs. traditional preparation and certification programs. This Policy Brief discusses issues and data relevant to this debate and offers suggestions for developing more effective school and district leaders.

During the past two decades, policymakers concerned with improving American public education have been engaged in a vigorous debate on the merits of deregulation and alternative certification versus strengthening the existing system of principal and superintendent preparation and certification programs. Many education professionals assert that professional preparation programs build school leaders' capacity to sustain reform, while rigorous licensure standards assure quality leadership and protect the public interest. Advocates of deregulation urge the creation of alternative pathways to both the principalship and the superintendency for candidates from all sectors; they support reducing regulatory impediments and setting accountability standards for leadership performance.¹ Examination of these respective positions and analysis of data on state licensure requirements yields several suggestions for developing school and district leaders who can improve educational opportunities for all students.

Background

Across the disciplines, institutional accreditation and professional licensure are traditionally tied to protecting and promoting the public interest by validating and enforcing standards of institutional and professional program quality and integrity.² Observers writing since the 1970s have reported that accreditation standards have played a significant role in improving the academic programs of both colleges and universities and in the establishment of various professions and related public quality control assurances.³ Because of this public trust, accreditation and licensure agencies have had a compelling interest in aligning standards with changing knowledge and practice to maintain relevance within their fields. During the past century, the professions—including medicine, law, business, engineering, architecture, education—developed responsive and rigorous accreditation and licensure standards to protect the public trust.

In the case of education, states license teachers, principals, and superintendents (among others) to protect and promote the general welfare of the state citizenry, especially students in school settings.⁴ For many decades, legislators assumed that individuals who received a principal's certificate were qualified and prepared to safeguard students and to manage schools.⁵ However, the 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* raised public concern about the condition of American public education and identified educational leadership as both a leading cause of American educational malaise and a key to reform.⁶

During the past two decades (1983-2004), heightened concern for the quality of public schools has resulted in what may be the most comprehensive and sustained effort to improve education in American history. National commission and task force reports released between 1983 and 1989 made strong arguments for improving student learning and fundamentally changing how schools are organized, managed, and governed. During the mid-1980s several national commission reports identified school administrators as key to achieving high-performing schools.⁷ Subsequent task forces examined the nature of administrators' work and preparation—and affirmed they were pivotal actors in the algorithm of school reform and student success.⁸ Peterson and Finn observed, “At a time when the nation is deeply concerned about the performance of its schools, and near-to-obsessed with the credentials and careers of those who teach in them, scant attention has been paid to the preparation and qualifications of those who lead them.”⁹ As the scope and complexity of change intensified, and demands on principals and superintendents increased, calls mounted for reconfiguring professional preparation programs and adopting rigorous licensure standards.

This would not be the first time the role of principals and superintendents would undergo scrutiny and significant change. By some accounts, the role and focus of the principalship shifted over time from pedagogy in the 1920s; to scientific management in the 1930s; to patriotism in the 1940s and 1950s; to academic excellence in the 1960s; to social awareness in the 1970s; to instructional leadership in the 1980s; to improving student performance after the 1990s.¹⁰ The role of the superintendent underwent similar evolutionary changes as the nature of society and expectations for schooling changed during the past 150 years.¹¹

In the early 1990s, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) sponsored an initial response to the call for improving the preparation and qualifications of principals.¹² NPBEA identified 21 domains of knowledge and skills for principals, and teams of experts examined each domain. These teams produced a document titled *Principals for Our Changing Schools: Knowledge and Skill Base*, which was designed for universities to use in their preparation programs.¹³ This document took a monumental effort to produce. It received endorsement from the professional organizations and proved to be influential in some efforts to improve university-based educational administration programs.¹⁴ Further, it helped set the stage for standards-based administrator certification; however, the 21 domains of knowledge and skills for principals never became the foundation for preparation programs.¹⁵

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Following NPBEA's attempt to define the knowledge base for principals, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) led another initiative to provide guidelines for preparation programs through the development of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, which were to complement the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) curriculum guidelines.¹⁶ Initially, 24 states and 11 professional associations participated in developing ISLLC Standards. Consortium members drew from research on leadership, knowledge from the membership, and insights from school leaders in crafting a set of six standards that embodied the core knowledge, dispositions, and performances principals would need in practice. The standards address visionary leadership, instructional leadership, management for learning, ethical practice, linking school and community, and advocacy for schooling.

The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation (NCAELP) met in February 2002 to discuss preparation programs and professional development for principals.¹⁷ One difference

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between this and previous efforts was the inclusion of professional development, as well as preservice preparation, in deliberations. This commission focused on “developing a complex understanding of contemporary contextual factors affecting educational leadership and leadership preparation, (b) examining exceptional and innovative educational leadership preparation and professional development programs, (c) defining clearly and precisely how educational leadership preparation and professional development can support learning-focused leadership, and (d) creating action plans for preparation program change, evaluation, and continual improvement.”¹⁸

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) published *Professional Standards for the Superintendency*, and the Council of Chief State School Officers released *Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders*.¹⁹ These standards not only helped to recenter the profession, shifting it away from management to leadership focused on ensuring that all children learn, but also underscored the importance of having highly qualified principals and superintendents in schools and districts throughout the nation.

While the adoption of rigorous licensure standards has been a prominent element of educational reform during the past two decades, this approach has received strong criticism in some quarters. Two recent publications have energized the debate on deregulation and alternative certification of school administrators: *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto*, by the Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and *A License to Lead? A New Leadership Agenda for America's Schools*, by the Progress Policy Institute (PPI).²⁰ The centerpiece of both publications is the assertion that there is a critical shortage of highly qualified school and district administrators, which the authors do not equate with being licensed or certified. They urge the development of alternative routes to the principalship and superintendency to supplement the supply of leadership candidates trained via conventional programs. For example, PPI calls for a simple three-point set of requirements: (1) a bachelor's degree from an accredited

college or university, supplemented by a criminal background check; (2) demonstration of sufficient experience to “exhibit essential knowledge, temperament, and skills for the position”; and (3) demonstration of mastery of essential “technical knowledge and skill . . . (in areas of law, special education, etc.).”²¹

PPI's framework calls for a scaling down of expectations for expertise in the “entire range of knowledge and skills the organization requires,” depending instead upon a management team approach.²² The PPI approach also calls for

- performance-oriented criteria for recruiting and hiring leaders
- reliable systems to monitor leadership performance and hold leaders accountable
- support systems and ongoing professional development.²³

Generally, the challenge in developing such approaches is in working out the specifics, such as what level of “technical knowledge” would be required, and in which areas, and how such knowledge should be acquired.

State Data on Principal and Superintendent Certification and Alternate Routes

Feistritzer recently provided a state-by-state overview of administrator certification.²⁴ Data on 50 states and the District of Columbia indicate that 96 percent presently require certification for principals, 80 percent require superintendent licensure, and 47 percent provide for certification waivers for school principals and superintendents. Of the 24 public entities that report waivers, 7 (29 percent) indicate they are conditional, used in emergency situations, or are rarely used (pp. 75-76). In addition, Feistritzer reports that 17 states and the District of Columbia (33 percent) indicate they have alternate certification routes. Of these, 6 refer to principals and superintendents, 3 relate to principals only, and the remaining 11 concern superintendents. Feistritzer notes that only two states, Michigan and South Dakota, do not have certification requirements for either principals or superintendents. Five states (Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, Tennessee, Wyoming) and the District of Columbia do not issue superintendent licenses; rather, local school boards establish requirements for these positions. Florida is the only state that

has statutes allowing local school districts to set their own alternative qualifications for individuals aspiring to become principals.²⁵

Feistritzer reported that in states that have alternate routes, very few individuals, if any, avail themselves of the opportunity. The majority of aspiring administrators pursue certification through university-based professional preparation programs.²⁶ These data indicate states overwhelmingly endorse principal and superintendent certification and licensure, and there is no evidence of a trend toward providing alternate or nontraditional routes to certification and licensure.

Critical Shortage of Qualified Principals?

Modifications in the role of the principal continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s due to societal and economic changes such as the increasing racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of students entering the schools and the shift to a global economy increasingly reliant on technology and market-based solutions.²⁷ Further, many states mandate continuous improvement on student achievement assessments, which school leaders must manage. The aforementioned conditions serve to increase the complexity of an already complicated milieu for administrators, and they require principals who are skilled academic leaders and excellent managers. The challenge becomes how to identify and certify individuals for the principal's role.

Although several studies indicate there is a shortage of candidates for school leadership positions,²⁸ other studies suggest a sufficient supply of candidates to fill vacated principal positions.²⁹ For example, results from a comprehensive 2002 statewide study funded by Wallace-Reader's Digest indicate that, on average, 17 applicants exist for each opening in leadership positions at the school level.³⁰

However, simply looking at the numbers of individuals who are graduating and receiving administrator certification can give a false impression of available candidates. State policies that link teacher salary increases to academic degree attainment have contributed to growth in the number of certified administrators. As more teachers complete degrees in administration to obtain salary increases, policymakers are faced with the conundrum of having large pools of individuals who are certified to be administrators but have no intention of applying for principalship or superintendency positions.

Several additional studies found that the typical individual in the principal pool had been certified for 10 years and had a low level of job pursuit activity. Only about one-third of certified individuals were actively seeking administrative positions. Although most expressed a wide range of reasons for seeking certification, obtaining a salary increase was cited as most important.³¹

Given the ambiguity over the number of available principal candidates, it is not surprising to learn that 82 percent of superintendents surveyed agree that locating principals is an issue of major or moderate concern.³² Whether the shortage of principal candidates is perception or fact, there is general agreement that alternative certification programs for principals would increase the pool of applicants for vacant positions. The popularity of alternative certification programs seems to be due, also, to dissatisfaction in some quarters with the quality of aspiring principals prepared in traditional programs.³³

These dynamics play out in state legislatures, which tend to have two reasons for endorsing alternative preparation programs: (1) a need to increase the principal candidate pool or (2) dissatisfaction with the candidates prepared in traditional programs. In either case, the above concerns resulted in efforts to reconfigure university-based preservice programs so that they align more closely with the realities of practice and prepare principals and superintendents for different roles. Several associations either participated in or initiated discussions about leadership preparation, including the University Council for Educational Administration, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, the National Association for Secondary School Administrators, the National Association for Elementary School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation. These discussions, coupled with the standards movement, set criteria for guiding universities in their efforts to improve programs instead of supporting development of alternative certification programs.

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Critical Shortage of Qualified Superintendents?

Over the past decade, media coverage and journal articles helped convince policymakers and practitioners that superintendents were leaving the profession faster than they could be replaced. The perception of a nationwide applicant crisis was supported by anecdotal accounts of diminishing tenure rates, smaller applicant pools, and the declining quality of candidates.³⁴ As often happens, empirical evidence to the contrary has been frequently overlooked.³⁵ Ignoring evidence can lead to ill-conceived policies.

The question of quantity. Kowalski & Sweetland note that the probability of deregulating a profession is higher if policymakers believe a critical shortage exists that poses a risk to the public interest.³⁶ And although issues of adequacy of numbers, quality of applicants in superintendent search pools, and attrition rates are separate issues, they can have a collective effect. Kowalski, using an economist's analysis, concluded that claims of a shortage were unwarranted.³⁷ Feistritz, also, found no significant shortage of aspiring superintendents in applicant pools.³⁸

These studies do not provide much insight about the variation among districts, however. Glass and Björk identified factors contributing to low numbers of applicants in some districts. Reporting findings from a national study, they identified districts that have employed three to four CEOs in a 10-year period, a phenomenon they characterize as “churning” superintendents. In these circumstances, the locus of the problem shifts away from the superintendency to boards of education—and shifts the search for policy solutions to finding ways to deal with board conflict and instability. Glass and Björk also note that shortages of superintendent applicants may be situational, and they vary across districts of different size, geographic location, wealth, quality of life, and board characteristics. Issues of quality and quantity of applicant pools are complex and may reflect characteristics of local communities, states, and regions.³⁹

The issue of quality. The Broad Foundation/Fordham Institute *Manifesto* asserts that the core issue in the shortage problem is not one of quantity, but quality.⁴⁰

Glass, however, found that local school boards generally interview six to eight applicants before hiring. He also found that board presidents felt the total applicant pool to be of good quality, and 73 percent of board presidents felt that at least 50 percent of superintendent applicants were “well qualified.” Considering that school boards are looking for only one “well qualified” or “qualified” superintendent, these ratios appear favorable and fail to support claims about the lack of quality of individuals in applicant pools.⁴¹

Also, the issue of quality may be related, in part, to the changing nature of the superintendency.⁴² Glass, Björk, and Brunner report that, after receiving superintendent certification, aspiring superintendents often spend a decade or longer in other administrator positions before serving as a chief executive officer. Their survey data reveal that the majority (62 percent) of

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superintendents completed their degrees or licensure requirements well before significant education reforms began to take root and new job expectations began to unfold.⁴³ This lag time may contribute to a lack of

preparedness for changing job demands related to district reform—instructional leadership, community engagement, declining financial resources, and increasing accountability measures. However, superintendents' perceptions of what school boards primarily expect of superintendents place “leadership of district reforms” low on the list, far behind educational, managerial, and political leadership. Under these circumstances, boards may question the capacity of applicants to handle emerging job requirements.⁴⁴

The question of turnover. Anecdotal accounts of superintendents leaving the profession began in the early 1990s when a report in *The Executive Educator* erroneously stated that, on average, the tenure of superintendents in large urban districts was 2.5 years.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, this fallacy was perpetuated and contributed to the popular perception of a crisis in the field. Empirical evidence, however, reveals that the average tenure of superintendents has remained relatively stable over the past 30 years, ranging from 6 years in 1971, to 5.6 years in 1982, to 6.4 years in 1992, and 6.5 years in 2000—findings independently confirmed by Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella.⁴⁶ Although some districts may report

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difficulty in attracting and keeping superintendents, it may be less related to availability of candidates than about geographic location, quality of life, district characteristics, and board conflict.⁴⁷

Review of Approaches to Certification

Although states generally do have provisions for alternative certification and licensure, most use them infrequently or reserve them for emergency situations. Two distinct approaches are used to grant alternative certification. First, in states that have adopted ISLLC Standards for licensure, those pursuing alternative certification do not have to enroll in an approved university program. However, they are required, as are all applicants, to demonstrate competency by submitting a portfolio for review and to pass the School Leadership Licensure Assessment (SLLA) test. Although policymakers may agree that alternative certification routes are acceptable for outstanding applicants, they also concur that candidates must meet the same criteria for demonstrated professional knowledge and skills as do individuals opting for conventional preparation routes. This disposition reflects positions adopted by both the National Policy Board for Educational Administration and CCSSO's ISLLC Standards. Second, although the five alternative certification states (Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wyoming) and the District of Columbia do not require superintendent licensure, local school boards establish requirements for these positions. Florida is the only state that allows local school boards to establish principal qualifications.

These data suggest that, with few exceptions, state policies regarding alternative certification (1) maintain the notion of professional standards to protect the public interest, (2) are limited in scope, and (3) are infrequently used by individuals seeking entry.

Implications for Policy

Current empirical evidence suggests that, overall, both the quantity and quality of applicants in principal

and superintendent search pools continue to be adequate. In addition, no evident trend is under way in the states toward using alternative certification as a way to increase the pool of candidates. State legislatures continue to view licensure and professional standards as the most viable way to protect the public interest and ensure the quality of school and district administrators. However, it is possible that increasing the pool of candidates via alternative certification might be helpful in some hard-to-staff schools and districts.

As in all professions, the technical knowledge needed to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of principals and superintendents changes over time, as social conditions change and the growth in research-based knowledge increases; consequently, there is a need for ongoing professional development.

Based upon these understandings, it seems that alternative and conventional approaches share the need for a continuum of preparation and professional development to support the development of school and district leaders who can improve educational opportunities for all students:

Work-embedded learning is needed to improve superintendent preparation programs. The American Association of School Administrator's (AASA's) past three 10-year studies of the American superintendency asked superintendents to evaluate university-based educational administration programs. Findings were remarkably consistent over the 30-year period not only in rating them positively but also in criticizing the lack of opportunity for hands-on experience.⁴⁸ For example, the 2000 AASA study found that over 73 percent of superintendents designated their licensure program "excellent" (26 percent) or "good" (47 percent). Only 22 percent viewed their experience as "fair" and less than 4% said it was "poor." The study also rank-ordered superintendent responses that identified significant weaknesses in their preparation, which included (1) the lack of hands-on application, (2) inadequate access to technology, and (3) failure to link content to practice.⁴⁹

Increased collaboration between universities and districts will better prepare the next generation of school and district leaders. Preservice programs provide the foundation for professional growth and development. It is time for universities, policymakers, key stakeholders, and professional organizations to "acknowledge that they have similar interests and goals in the preparation of school leaders and recognize that they are connected by an interdependent web that requires

collaboration in all aspects of the preparation of school leaders.”⁵⁰

Hale and Moorman report how school districts and universities have engaged in such collaborations to provide advanced professional development for principals.⁵¹ For example, a project carried out by the University of Kentucky, Morehead State University, and the Pike County School System in Kentucky recently received recognition from the U.S. Department of Education as a model for how universities and districts can work together to strengthen leadership in schools, customize programs to prepare principals for the unique circumstances of work in rural Appalachia, and engage in action research that innovatively integrates theory and practice.

As demonstrated by this example and others, the expertise found in districts can enhance the knowledge base provided by universities. Such partnerships enable administrator preparation programs to include schools as laboratories where action research can be completed. These partnerships support work-embedded learning, which is a core feature of successful adult learning and knowledge transfer.⁵²

Internships are essential to successful work-embedded learning experiences. Empirical evidence suggests that instructional strategies integrating the acquisition of professional knowledge and field-based experiences can enhance learning, retrieval, and knowledge transfer to new situations.⁵³ Thus, relying only on conventional classroom or work-embedded learning models has limited value.⁵⁴ Hoberman and Mailick,⁵⁵ as well as Bridges and Hallinger,⁵⁶ persuasively argue that learning can be enhanced and enriched when it is situated in actual work settings and subject to a full range of variables, uncertainties, regulations, and procedures. In this regard, formal and experiential learning are viewed as complementary processes rather than separate domains. Thus, it may be advisable to reorient principal and superintendent preparation programs more explicitly toward acquiring and applying professional knowledge in solving problems of practice through the development of formal internship programs.

Currently, states have been reluctant to support full-time internships, and aspiring administrators are not financially able to support themselves while gaining work experience. As a consequence, the majority of aspiring superintendents continue to self-select into graduate degree and licensure programs, attend on a part-time basis, hold mid-level administrative positions,

and have family obligations that preclude participation in extensive field-based activities.⁵⁷ The lack of time to participate in substantive field-based work experiences is a serious limitation for students in educational administration programs.

Principals and superintendents need to continue their growth and development. Professional development for school leaders should include a valid purpose, a coherent curriculum, a variety of instructional strategies, a link to state initiatives and standards, technology when appropriate, and follow-up (meetings, conferences, mentoring, and reflection) to enhance the success of change initiatives.⁵⁸ Even though school leaders may be experienced, they still can benefit from activities such as “study groups, advanced seminars such as the CASL [Chicago Academy for School Leadership] Coaching Experience, reading and discussion groups, presentations by current thinkers or expert practitioners, attendance at national academies or conferences, or opportunities to become coaches, facilitators, or trainers themselves.”⁵⁹

Notes

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