Are Alternative School Leader Preparation Programs Really Needed to Prepare Next-Generation School Leaders?

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Are alternative school leader preparation programs really needed to prepare next generation school leaders?

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**OVERVIEW**

The essays in this chapter focus on the issue of how best to recruit the very best administrative talent to leadership positions in schools. For years, the accepted practice has been for school leaders to be prepared through traditional school administration programs with higher education institutions. These programs, almost exclusively housed within colleges and schools of education, consisted of a range of courses from school law to school finance, often with associated and embedded field and clinical components.

The focus on school leader preparation has emerged in partial response to the No Child Left Behind legislation. Clearly, there are expanded expectations regarding what principals can and should be able to do in order to be effective as school leaders. Critics of traditional preparation programs, such as Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, argue that far too little of the principal preparation curriculum focuses on accountability while far too much deals with issues that simply do not create opportunities for principals to understand how to use data and how to effectively evaluate the personnel who report to them.
Critics such as Hess and others expect principals to be able to use data in ways that will help them manage school programs so that all students are able to achieve to their full potential and so that every teacher can be productive in terms of fostering essential and necessary student academic growth. The critics challenge whether traditional programs have been able to keep pace with the educational demands that are a part of a competitive, globalized economy. Whether such critics "have it right" is debatable, but what both critics and advocates of traditional programs agree on is the fact that the principal is absolutely critical to the success of any school program. Teachers need a school leader who understands how to manage a complex educational environment. The question remains about how best to prepare such school leaders, which serves as the focus for this chapter.

This is not the first time that there have been serious and ongoing efforts to upgrade the quality of administrator preparation, but even with current and previous efforts, serious concerns have surfaced as to whether traditional programs can really deliver to PreK–12 schools the intellectual talent needed to foster educational excellence. Some critics believe that the real solution to the problem is to bring persons with business degrees into schools who understand how to operate, manage, and market businesses. Indeed, some universities around the country are now working through their business schools to prepare individuals who have interests in taking their business degrees into educational environments for the purpose of serving as principals or school leaders.

Emmy L. Partin and Jamie Davies O'Leary, from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, make the case that more nontraditional, nonuniversity-based options are needed. They argue that programs run by charter management organizations or selected nonprofits, such as New Leaders for New Schools, create new vehicles for attracting talent to school leadership positions that simply are not being evidenced through traditional, university-based programs. In addition, Partin and O'Leary assert that many of the nontraditional options place emphasis on preparing administrators for some of the nation's most poorly performing schools, where the need for quality school leaders is most pronounced.

Theodore J. Kowalski from the University of Dayton takes a different view. Kowalski is one of the nation's thought leaders in terms of school leader preparation practices. He has concerns that the "alternatives" will deprofessionalize school leadership at precisely the time when more professional skills and understandings are required by those assuming the difficult responsibilities associated with school administration. Kowalski perceives that, in general, no shortage of administrative talent exists in the United States and that traditional
programs are much better suited to address the preparation demands that are currently found in the educational marketplace.

These two essays capture in a significant way much of the active and substantive debate currently found in the professional literature about how to ensure that the nation secures the school leaders it needs. Everyone agrees that school principals and district superintendents are critical ingredients to educational excellence. What these two essays highlight is the very different approaches that policymakers and practitioners have taken relative to how best to recruit and train the next generation of school leaders.

In reading these two essays, consider the following questions. First, will emerging alternatives really deprofessionalize what it means to be a school leader? Second, if it is really essential to have the right people in a leadership position, how should schools best recruit the talent they need? Finally, is the key to recruiting more professional principals paying them more so that you attract better quality or training them differently so that they are assured of possessing skills they need for success?

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The job of a school leader is dramatically different than it was decades or even a few years ago. To meet the needs of students—especially those in America's most underserved communities—K–12 schooling has rightly taken on a variety of shapes. Today's school leaders oversee not only traditional school buildings but also charter schools, virtual academies, "turnarounds," and district schools that operate within atypical contexts—such as "innovation zones" or portfolio-managed districts. Add to this diversity of settings a sense of urgency around raising student performance and closing achievement gaps and add state and federal accountability systems that require leaders to have expertise in academic content standards, testing, and performance data.

Simply put, a school leader's role today is a very different animal from that of the quintessential red-brick schoolhouse principal of 30 or 40 years ago, whose measure of success has been described thusly: "If the school was tidy and orderly, the staff content, the parents quiescent, and the downtown bureaucracy untroubled, the principal was assumed to be doing his or her job" (Broad Foundation & Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003, p. 17).

WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS?

Trends in K–12 education have created new demands and expectations for school leaders and evidence the need for alternative leadership programs. To be clear, "alternative" programs mean those preparing leaders in a different manner and with a different focus than typical schools of education. They include hybrid education–business programs, school-based residency programs, specialty programs specifically designed to meet the needs of charter or turnaround leaders, or any other training option meant to prepare school leaders to be effective in nontraditional settings.

In particular, five trends in education have redesigned the role of school leader.

1. The era of academic accountability is no longer an "era"—it's permanent

Regardless of the type of school they lead, all principals operate within the context of state and federal accountability systems that require expertise in
standards, testing, and increasingly sophisticated data. Ushered in even before the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), accountability is a hallmark of American schooling. Presuppositions that accountability would be an artifact of Republican leadership have diminished now that the Obama Administration and many other distinguished Democratic leaders have made clear their support for keeping intact large portions of NCLB and have promulgated a Race to the Top initiative that clearly has strong accountability components. States have spent millions establishing academic content standards, assessments, and mechanisms for reporting student performance data. The education community generally recognizes the value of such systems. In other words, accountability in education has gone from being loathed, to somewhat palatable, to now mainstream.

At the same time, there is an increasing sense of urgency around lifting the performance of all students while also closing achievement gaps between low income and minority students and their wealthier and White peers. Most educators and reformers realize that accountability—specifically, academic standards, assessments, data-reporting and corrective action—is a vital tool with which to diagnose and address such gaps. School leaders today must be equipped to lead in this high-stakes environment. It is a moral imperative not only to ensure that the gaps are closing but also to ensure that our school leaders are trained to be able to handle this herculean task.

2. Persistent failure is no longer acceptable

NCLB was the original impetus behind turning around low-performing schools, stipulating that schools not meeting student performance targets be identified and corrective action instituted to accelerate student growth. Many such failing schools still languish years later, but recent turnaround policy has put its money where its mouth is. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan emphasized the need to turn around the nation’s lowest performing 5,000 schools in 5 years, and $3.5 billion in Title I money (School Improvement Grants program) has been allocated for states to identify and turnaround chronically underperforming schools. (School turnarounds were also a major pillar of the $4.35 billion federal Race to the Top program and were written into many states’ Race to the Top reform plans.) Schools receiving turnaround money had to agree to enact one of four approved turnaround strategies, which include installing a new principal, closing the school, and restarting it—possibly under a charter operator, or requiring the school leader to lead a transformation of the school. And Ohio’s recently passed biennial budget, HB 153, stipulates that district schools chronically ranking in the lowest 5% of performance must be overhauled using strategies that are similar to those
outlined by the School Improvement Grant program. At minimum, successfully turning around these schools—using any of these methods—will require an equivalent number of school leaders who are trained to take on such a formidable challenge.

3. Charter schools are growing slowly but steadily

More than 5,000 charter schools currently serve 1.8 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia. In some cities, the market share for charters is very high: 69.5% of New Orleans students attend charters and 39.2% do so in Washington, D.C., according to the latest report on charter market share from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010–2011 report). In Dayton, 29% of the public school student population attends a charter school. Even a modest rate of growth in the charter sector translates into a need for hundreds, maybe thousands, of school leaders prepared for the unique challenges of charter leadership.

Traditional training programs cannot, and are in fact not meant to, prepare charter leaders for responsibilities that their district peers do not normally face. A 2008 report on charter school leader development calls the difference between charter training and traditional programs “striking,” and points to coursework in areas vital to charter success that are not covered by the latter in ways that address the unique programming and operating needs of charter schools: labor relations, personnel, charter school law and legal issues, financial management, facilities management, charter renewal, and so on (Campbell & Grubb, 2008). In response to this skill gap, many charter management organizations have developed their own in-house training programs to equip up-and-coming leaders to face the unique challenges of leading a charter school.

4. Decentralization and school level autonomy are increasingly common

School systems are experimenting with alternative ways to manage schools and will continue doing so as more central district offices come under criticism for top-heavy administrative loads and for being out of touch with the needs of individual schools and students. Whether via school-based budgeting—which gives the school leader more control over a building’s financial and personnel decisions in exchange for academic performance—or a “portfolio” approach to managing schools as seen in New York City, New Orleans, and Chicago, school leaders may find themselves in situations where expertise beyond that accrued via typical education coursework is essential.
Paul Hill, education researcher and director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, predicts that by the year 2030, this portfolio-style management will have transformed education broadly, with decentralization and decision making devolved to the school level the new norm (Hill, 2010). School leaders in many urban areas already work in districts experimenting with various forms of decentralized leadership. If Hill’s predictions ring true, many more will need to develop the skills necessary to lead in environments similar to what their charter peers face, where decisions over personnel, spending, purchasing services, and so forth, are as frequent as instructional decisions.

5. Job mobility and career-changing is the norm

College graduates today switch careers and have, on average, more and various types of jobs by the end of their working lives than they did a generation ago. To attract the most dynamic leaders capable of leading and transforming our nation’s neediest schools, we should recruit leaders from sectors outside of education with proven track records of success and who demonstrate the skills necessary to lead schools in need of turnaround. Talented leaders might be more attracted to working in education if the skill sets they acquired through school leadership training programs were more portable and did not lock them into one career. A hybrid principal preparation program that has coursework in business, for example, may be more attractive to smart candidates who otherwise might be drawn into the private sector.

While the landscape of K-12 education has shifted tremendously—and, by default, what is required of the next generation of school leaders—the vast majority of America’s school principals are trained for their jobs in much the same fashion that they were decades ago. This training is often insufficient for those hoping to take the reins of a charter school, district turnaround school, other nontraditional education setting, or even those leading traditional schools facing sizable achievement gaps.

Traditional programs—generally graduate programs offered by colleges of education—simply do not offer adequate and appropriate training for leaders of such schools. And much of the typical principal preparation hasn’t adapted sufficiently to train regular school leaders for what they need to know, to say nothing of the next generation. Take academic accountability and school improvement, for example.

NCLB was signed into law in 2002, establishing a system of academic accountability that applied to every public school in the country. Schools were required to meet performance expectations and continually improve or face major overhaul. Yet 3 years later, a study by the American Enterprise Institute...
Standards and Accountability

(AEI) found that just 2% of traditional principal training coursework “addressed accountability in the context of school management or school improvement and less than five percent included instruction on managing school improvement via data, technology, or empirical research” (Hess & Kelly, 2005b, p. 37).

That same study found that traditional principal preparation programs spent little time on the use of data or teaching important personnel management topics, such as recruitment, selection, and hiring of teachers; teacher dismissal; or teacher compensation. This is occurring even as education becomes more data driven and results oriented and as more authority over personnel decisions is being devolved to building leaders in districts. It is also evidenced in the charter sector, where school leaders function as small-business CEOs.

What’s more, the training that traditional programs do offer may not be useful to prospective school leaders. In his 4-year examination of colleges of education, Arthur Levine, then president of Columbia University’s Teachers College, found that administrator-training coursework is “a nearly random collection of courses” disconnected from the realities of principals’ jobs (Levine, 2005).

There is also a misalignment between the expertise and perspectives in traditional training programs and what many future school leaders, especially those in niches like charter schools and school turnarounds, need to know.

Scan the websites of any college of education administrator-training program. You will find a faculty comprising brilliant men and women with robust curricula vitae touting interest and research in a wide range of education topic areas. A standard principal licensure program covers areas such as instructional leadership and school culture and may include vague course descriptions of topics such as “educational change” or “political leadership.” This is not to say such subjects are not useful to some traditional school leaders, like the lucky ones not facing the sorts of organizational or achievement programs described earlier, but you will find few, if any, professors in traditional schools of education with experience starting up a new school or running one or with expertise in school finance, facilities acquisition, or school funding beyond theories presented in textbooks.

If professors have never developed a 5-year budget for a school, done a market analysis to gauge future enrollment, or used student level academic performance data to make personnel decisions—nor spent time studying those who have—should they really be expected to teach someone else how to do that work?

In the halls of education schools, you will also find few supporters of major education reform ideas, from school choice and charter schools to weighted
student funding and pay-for-performance for teachers. A 1997 survey by Public Agenda found this to be the case, and newer research holds it true. AEI’s *Learning to Lead* found a strong left-leaning bias in the topic descriptions and assigned readings of traditional principal training programs (and in 2005, when the study was conducted, charter schools, merit pay, etc., could be firmly characterized as “right-leaning”) (see Hess & Kelly, 2005b).

When principals-in-training at traditional preparation programs do receive clinical instruction through an internship or practicum, it is often insufficient—whether because of the length of the experience, its content, or other factors. For example, Levine found that it is not standard practice to pair principals-in-training with proven or successful current principals for their internships. Rather, trainees are placed by convenience.

To ensure that school leaders—especially those who will lead our neediest schools—are equipped to effectively manage in a variety of high-stakes and diverse school environments, it is critical to support and grow alternative training programs designed to deliver the training they need.

**WHAT DO THESE ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS LOOK LIKE?**

Alternative school leadership training programs have cropped up to equip leaders with skill sets they would otherwise not get from a traditional preparation program. By definition, alternative programs are as varied as the needs faced by various schools and student populations.

A chronically underperforming school facing replacement of half its staff, for example, needs a leader who can oversee the immediate and probably chaotic transition and transformation of the school’s culture. This type of leader must know how to deliver results quickly and dramatically lift student performance, while also navigating a tumultuous day-to-day environment. A leader of a new start-up charter school might need to handle leasing a school building and developing a school budget, as well as recruiting and hiring new staff and selecting curriculum. Further, charter start-up leaders must understand how to navigate state and federal laws around school funding and spending, maintain student records, and handle students’ individualized education programs (IEPs), to name a few.

A traditional school leader whose district has just been named part of an innovation zone, wherein some of the typical regulations imposed by state law and/or collective bargaining agreements are lifted, must be able to think outside the box about how to redesign the school to meet the needs of students. He or she must be self-directed and have business acumen if budgetary decision making is devolved to the school level.
Many training programs already exist to prepare school leaders for these nontraditional settings, and most of them have impressive—and measurable—results when it comes to the performance of students led by their alumni. These programs are housed within universities or run via nonprofits or charter management organizations, and they may be geared toward leaders of a variety of school types. Here are just a few such programs:

**Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program**

Housed in the Jones Graduate School of Business at Houston's Rice University, Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program (REEP) offers two pathways for the alternative principal license. The master of business administration (MBA) pathway takes 2 years and equips candidates with core business skills as well as courses in leadership, management, organizational behavior, accounting, and data analysis. The business certificate pathway takes 15 months to complete and is highly selective (just 15 students are admitted per year); students enroll in the innovative Rice Advanced Management Program, and they take a variety of courses in business and education. Both pathways require school-based training and previous teaching experience (2 years of experience for the MBA pathway and 4 to 7 for the business certificate). Leaders are equipped to lead a variety of types of schools.

**New Leaders for New Schools**

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) is a yearlong, paid residency that trains principals and places them in 11 urban districts across the United States. Candidates spend 1 year alongside a mentor principal working in an urban public school, while also working with coaches and specialists to fulfill their own individualized “leadership development plan.” Since 2001, NLNS has placed 640 leaders in schools across 12 urban areas. The program places principals across all grades in both district and charter schools.

**Building Excellent Schools**

Building Excellent Schools (BES) is a yearlong, paid fellowship that trains leaders to start and lead their own charter schools in strategically chosen sites across the country. Fellows complete a residency in a high performing charter school as well as a year of planning time in the community where they are founding a school. The program consists of rigorous site-based training, coaching, and advising and prepares leaders to write and submit their own
chart a r e p l i c a t i o n,  s e c u r e a f a c i l i t y, r e c r u i t a n d e n r o l l s t u d e n t s, h i r e t e a c h e r s, a n d b u i l d t h e i r c u r r i c u l u m. T h e p r o g r a m i s h i g h l y s e l e c t i v e (4% o f a p p l i c a n t s a r e a c c e p t e d) a n d b y 2 0 1 1-2 0 1 2 w i l l g r o w t o 4 8 s c h o o l s i n 2 0 c i t i e s a n d w i l l s e r v e 1 9, 5 0 0 s t u d e n t s.

**University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program**

Started i n 2 0 0 4 a n d c o m m i s s i o n e d b y t h e V i r g i n i a D e p a r t m e n t o f E d u c a t i o n, t h i s p r o g r a m i s g e a r e d t o w a r d p r i n c i p a l s a n d d i s t r i c t a n d s c h o o l l e v e l l e a d e r s h i p t e a m s a t s c h o o l s i n n e e d o f o v e r h a u l. T h e U n i v e r s i t y o f V i r g i n i a c a l l s t h e p r o g r a m t h e k i n d o f e x e c u t i v e e d u c a t i o n t h a t t y p i c a l l y i s r e c e i v e d o n l y b y h i g h l e v e l b u s i n e s s l e a d e r s. S p e c i f i c a l l y g e a r e d t o w a r d d i s t r i c t p e r s o n n e l t a s k e d w i t h t u r n i n g a r o u n d t h e l o w e st p e r f o r m i n g s c h o o l s, i t i n c l u d e s c o u r s e w o r k r a n g i n g f r o m d a t a a n a l y s i s t o c a s e s t u d i e s o n r e n e w i n g t r o u b l e d o r g a n i z a t i o n s. R e s u l t s f r o m 4 3 s c h o o l t u r n a r o u n d s p e c i a l i s t s f r o m t h e p r o g r a m a r e p o s i t i v e , w i t h s c h o o l l e a d e r s a c h i e v i n g r e d u c e d a c a d e m i c f a i l u r e r a t e s o r m e t i n g A d e q u a t e Y e a r l y P r o g r e s s a n d o t h e r b e n c h m a r k s.

**Notre Dame’s Educational Leadership Program**

A j o i n t p r o g r a m i n w h i c h c a n d i d a t e s r e c e i v e a n e x e c u t i v e M B A f r o m t h e c o l l e g e o f b u s i n e s s, a s w e l l a s t r a i n i n g f r o m t h e I n s t i t u t e f o r E d u c a t i o n a l I n i ti a t i v e s, N o t r e D a m e ’ s E d u c a t i o n a l L e a d e r s h i p P r o g r a m (N D E L P) c a l l s i t s e l f a “r e s u l t s- d r i v e n p r i n c i p a l p r e p a r a t i o n p a t h w a y” t h a t i s m o r e c o n c e r n e d w i t h t e a c h i n g l e a d e r s t o l e a d s u c c e s s f u l s c h o o l s t h a n w i t h “t e a c h i n g t h e o r i e s a b o u t s c h o o l s a n d l e a d e r s h i p.” T h e p r o g r a m, w h i c h b e g a n i n 2 0 0 9, r e q u i r e s c a n d i d a t e s t o h a v e 2 y e a r s o f t e a c h i n g e x p e r i e n c e a n d l i k e m a n y o t h e r a l t e r n a t i v e t r a i n i n g p r o g r a m s, c o v e r s a m i x o f b u s i n e s s a n d e d u c a t i o n - s p e c i f i c t r a i n i n g.

Opponents of alternative preparation programs typically root their arguments in *theories* concerning the overall profession—namely, that alternative preparation “deprofessionalizes” the job, undermines the role of school leadership, or leads to deregulation and a dangerous sort of “anything goes” mentality over who leads our nation’s children. In reality, the alternative programs for which we advocate do none of these things. Examine the efficacy of any of the actual programs listed, the student demographics they serve, and the highly selective nature of their admissions processes, and such claims quickly dissolve. If anything, alternative training programs bolster the too often denigrated profession—such programs are highly competitive and attract distinguished leaders who might not otherwise enroll in a school leadership program.
Moreover, the assertion that alternative programs deprofessionalize the role of school leader should be a secondary concern in light of glaring achievement gaps and chronic underperformance in many of America's poorest communities. Existing principal training programs have had decades to adapt and better prepare school leaders to lead chronically dysfunctional schools, and thus far—using stagnant student achievement, graduation rates, or gaps between various groups as metrics—they haven't succeeded. Alternative programs, many of which select the best and the brightest leaders through rigorous admissions processes (thereby adding prestige to the profession rather than detracting it), should be judged by their efficacy, not by abstract ideas about deregulating the profession and protecting adult interests over that of students.

Finally, it is important to note that while all of these programs aim to provide candidates with skills and knowledge they wouldn't otherwise gain in a traditional principal training program, they adhere to a fundament of traditional pathways by requiring that candidates have experience teaching before becoming a school leader. Opponents of alternative training programs often rely on the myth that such programs are somehow antiteacher or antieducation—that "outsiders" who think they know better than traditionally trained educators wish to run our schools—but such arguments simply aren't accurate. Most alternative training programs do not divorce the school leader from the teaching and learning happening in the school and require prior significant teaching experience.

Realizing the need for more training programs capable of preparing principals to work in our nation's toughest schools, Senator Michael Bennet (D–Colorado)—also former superintendent of Denver Public Schools—proposed legislation in June 2010 to create a School Leadership Academy that would train principals to intervene effectively in failing schools. The bill envisions a network of training centers run jointly by nonprofit organizations, universities, and state education agencies or districts—with one specializing in rural turnaround schools. Beyond the trends reshaping the educational landscape in the United States, this demand for alternative training programs—and the political support it is able to muster—is evidence of the need to foster such programs into the future.

More important, such programs aim to get effective leaders into many of our nation's worst-performing schools; candidates enrolling in alternative programs often must demonstrate a strong commitment to improving educational outcomes for low income children. To inhibit alternative programs that are successfully fulfilling this mission is asinine; indeed, to do anything less than fully support their sustenance and growth is doing a disservice to children and families in America's neediest communities.
In their article about the politics of principal preparation, Frederick Hess and Andrew Kelly (2005a) described me as a “long-time advocate of traditional preparation” who has “heralded the emergence of a new group of reformers from within the education schools” (p. 157). To be precise, I believe that the tradition of preparing principals in schools of education should be sustained; but I also believe that the nature and number of those programs should be altered. Most notably, preparation programs need to become homogeneous, rigorous, practice-based, and professionally accredited (as they are in other professions). And if this occurs, I predict many of the poorest university-based programs will close because they will be unable or unwilling to meet accreditation standards. Conversely, I believe that the creation of alternative preparation programs is a myopic and even reckless decision, primarily because it exacerbates rather than attenuates several problems that have and continue to diminish the effectiveness of traditional programs.

The term alternative preparation has been used in various ways, and therefore, it needs to be defined. This essay describes alternative preparation as including programs that possess one or more of the following characteristics: They are not sponsored or operated by an accredited school of education; they are not based on standards embraced by the education profession (e.g., Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards); they allow noneducators to enroll. Defined in this manner, alternative preparation almost always challenges common criteria for state administrator licensing, norms such as having a valid teacher’s license, having experience as a classroom teacher, and completing a state-approved and professionally accredited preparation program. As a matter of public policy, alternative preparation should be evaluated on the basis of social consequences. Specifically, the process should be sanctioned if there is compelling evidence that it will ultimately improve schools or at least the practice of school administration.

The intent of this essay is to refute four contentions commonly made by those who advocate alternative preparation programs. These assertions relate to the status of school administration as a profession, the shortage of qualified administrators, the effectiveness of university-based preparation, and the social benefit of having nontraditional administrators.
STATUS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Alternative preparation is more likely to become public policy if school administration is cast as a managerial role rather than a profession. In most professions, practitioners, possessing an esoteric body of knowledge, essential skills, and appropriate dispositions, are licensed and granted autonomy and prestige in return for their services. This arrangement, intended to protect society from incompetent practitioners and quackery, has been periodically questioned when applied to educators. In large part, challenges have stemmed from inevitable conflict between democracy and professionalism (Levin, 1999). Over time, states legitimized a fragile compromise. Expressly, educators were licensed by states and permitted to call themselves professionals; concurrently, they were denied the status and autonomy accorded to practitioners in most other professions (Kowalski, 2009).

The notion that superintendents and principals should be professionals who recommend and carry out public policy has existed for more than a century. As far back as 1895, for example, Andrew Draper, president of the University of Illinois and later commissioner of education in New York, wrote a national report detailing the merits of professionalism. Explicitly, he urged school boards to give superintendents the authority to employ teachers, supervise instruction, and manage finances (Callahan, 1962). Giving school administrators more autonomy and power remains controversial to this very day, in part because some citizens believe that professionalism diminishes their power and in part because some citizens do not believe that administrators possess an esoteric body of knowledge. For those who harbor these beliefs, alternative preparation is a gateway to deprofessionalization.

If school administration is reduced to a managerial role, then there is no need for principals to understand pedagogy, no justification for them recommending instructional policies, and no need for them to be licensed. Those who seek to institutionalize this change, however, conveniently ignore possible consequences. In the realm of representative democracy, school administrators are expected to forge recommendations based on expert knowledge, and school boards, acting on behalf of their constituents, decide whether to accept the recommendation. Both administrators and school board members are then held accountable to the community (Shedd & Bacharach, 1991). This arrangement always placed public school administrators in the difficult position of forging policy, while remaining subservient to the will of the people (Wirt & Kirst, 2009).

Indirectly if not directly, the concept of alternative preparation casts administrators as only managers, and it removes the need to balance democracy
and professionalism. As a result, future policy decisions will be made without the benefit of professional wisdom. We must ask ourselves if this arrangement will help or hinder school improvement.

**SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED ADMINISTRATORS**

A second excuse for alternative preparation is that it is essential to ameliorate a critical shortage of qualified administrators. The application of the concept in relation to labor shortages has precedent. During World War II, for example, a dearth of health care providers was addressed by creating fast tracks to physician and dentist licensing. Specifically, academic study in these professions was made continuous (including summers), the curricula were condensed, and the length of medical or dental school was reduced to 2 years. Although this alternative form of preparation apparently served its purpose, three facts need to be weighed, especially by those who believe the same changes should be made for preparing school administrators. First, the shortage of physicians and dentists was validated and accepted not only by policymakers but also by the respective professions. Second, the accelerated education programs were conducted by accredited medical and dental schools and not independent agencies. Third, after the war ended and the shortage subsided, the alternative programs were eliminated because they were an acceptable temporary substitute for traditional preparation. No one considered them to be an equal or superior option.

In the case of school administration, claims of labor shortages have been widely accepted. In truth, the average size of an applicant pool for an administrative vacancy is around 15 to 20 licensed applicants. In what other profession would we declare a labor shortage given these statistics? Recognizing this fact, antiprofessionists have purposefully distinguished between a “licensed” administrator and a “qualified” administrator. The quintessential example is found in *Better Leaders for America’s Schools: A Manifesto* (Broad Foundation & Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003). The anonymous authors admitted that the shortage problem in school administration “is not one of quantity: Most states have plenty of people licensed as school administrators, often more than they have positions to fill. The urgent problem is quality” (p. 16). Yet the authors neither provided evidence to support this generalization nor defined being qualified.

If quantity and quality issues are considered collectively, then logic suggests that alternative preparation will not eradicate the shortage of qualified school administrators. The few corporate executives and retired generals who have become nontraditional education administrators have been employed as superintendents of large schools systems where they receive high salaries and
dozens if not hundreds of administrative assistants. The typical superintendent and principal, however, practice under very different circumstances; for instance, they must directly deal with both leadership and management issues, they have little or no administrative support staff, and they have modest salaries. The contention that there is a cadre of highly competent managers champing at the bit to be school administrators is simply a myth. Consequently, alternative programs are likely to train a combination of educators who want to bypass several years of graduate school and noneducators who have difficulty getting attractive positions in the private sector (Kowalski, 2004). In summary, the purported shortage of administrators is questionable, and even if it were not, providing aspiring administrators with less and more narrow training will lower rather than raise qualifications.

INEFFECTIVENESS OF ALL TRADITIONAL PREPARATION

University-based academic preparation has been disparaged by critics from outside and inside the education profession. Although the nature of the criticisms has often been the same such as citing such claims as irrelevant courses or a lack of practice-based experiences, the two groups have differed in their conceptualizations of traditional preparation and in their proposed solutions. Those from outside the school administration profession (e.g., Hess, 2003; Mazzeo, 2003) have had a proclivity to discuss university-based preparation as a homogeneous process; those from inside the profession have not. Actually, there are vast differences among the approximately 550 institutions preparing school administrators in this country, and because they vary in curriculum, instructional quality, and resources, they are not equally effective.

As a result of their conceptualizations of traditional preparation, external critics see deregulation generally and alternative preparation specifically as beneficial public policy. Many internal critics (e.g., Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005; Elmore, 2007; Murphy, 2002) propose an opposite solution; they seek to reform university-based preparation, specifically by making it more practice-based and rigorous.

As a form of deregulation, giving preparation programs a free hand to determine curriculum and standards also is a tested idea. Circa 1830, for example, many states amended physician licensing laws so that medical schools were given autonomy, especially by making a medical school diploma the equivalent of a state license to practice medicine. This myopic policy essentially deregulated state control over physicians. Rather than improving medical schools and producing more qualified physicians, it produced an entrepreneurial
COUNTERPOINT: Theodore J. Kowalski

environment in which many students of limited ability or academic interest paid high tuition costs for degrees from sham institutions. The United States soon had a glut of physicians, many unqualified to perform services entrusted to them—some were actually illiterate (Numbers, 1988).

As a former teacher, superintendent, and college of education dean, my work has criticized deficiencies in academic preparation for decades. Although I believe that drastic changes to the status quo are warranted, I believe that creating shortcuts, adding more programs, and permitting diverse and unregulated programs will only make things worse. In his study of administrator preparation, Arthur Levine (2005), former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, found that many new programs he analyzed were neither innovative nor more effective than the traditional programs they sought to replace. In some cases, they were worse.

SOCIAL BENEFIT OF ALTERNATIVE PREPARATION

Promoters of alternative programs often suggest that graduates of these programs will outperform traditional school administrators. In large measure, this promise apparently is nested in the perception of administration as solely a managerial role. This supposition like those already addressed needs to be scrutinized. In the first decades of the 20th century, for instance, leading superintendents, prompted by captains of industry, attempted to dissociate themselves from the teaching and the education profession, predominantly by emulating corporate managers.

After studying this period, noted historian Raymond Callahan (1962) concluded that rather than professional leaders, these superintendents were dupes who mindlessly imposed a corporate mentality and efficiency-based culture into their systems. As such, they subordinated educational questions to business considerations, put a scientific label on some very unscientific and dubious methods and practices, and constructed an anti-intellectual climate. Callahan contended that they “did not understand education or scholarship. Thus, they could and did approach education in a businesslike, mechanical, organizational way” (p. 247).

More recently, Diane Ravitch (2010) echoed concerns about promoting a corporate mentality in public education. She offered compelling evidence that reforms such as vouchers, deprofessionalization, and alternative preparation have actually been counterproductive with respect to improving underperforming schools. This conclusion is not surprising for experienced administrators. They recognize that transforming ineffective schools is an exceedingly difficult and complex assignment, one that extends well beyond competent
management. Therefore, alternative preparation in the absence of empirical evidence that it is a social benefit is precarious public policy.

Research conducted with alternative preparation of teachers also is insightful because it is indicative of efforts to deprofessionalize education. Richard A. Neumann (1994), for instance, found that teachers from alternative programs were not as well prepared as their peers. Notably, they also were disproportionately employed by inner-city, low income schools— institutions where student needs were the highest. And in their study, Lora Cohen-Vogel and Thomas M. Smith (2007) found that contrary to proponent claims, alternative programs did not increase the quality of applicant pools by attracting large numbers of experienced individuals from other disciplines.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

This essay has challenged four of the common reasons espoused by proponents of alternative preparation. The intent was to explain opposition to the concept and to show that the suppositions underlying it are flawed. Past experiments with deregulation and alternative preparation apparently have not convinced antiprofessionists to heed George Santayana's (1980) warning that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

From this opposing viewpoint, alternative preparation programs for school administrators are a manifestation of deregulation, a broader objective intended to deconstruct this nation's public education system (Ravitch, 2010). Specifically, a corporate mentality moves public education from the public marketplace to private marketplace—a move that would allow individuals rather than society to determine the quantity and quality of education provided. Recasting administration as solely a managerial role and preparing future administrators accordingly is one strategy related to this mission. And if it succeeds, it will be detrimental, especially to the schools that most need improvement.

For schools to improve, their principals and superintendents must acquire a level of social authority that permits them to work collaboratively with teachers and other stakeholders to enact necessary changes. Clearly, they will not be able to achieve this lofty goal by simply managing human and material resources. Specifically, their academic preparation needs to be rigorous and based on a core set of validated practices related to leading and managing (Elmore, 2007). It is unimaginable how these improvements will be delivered by programs detached from academe and professionalism. In closing, it is worth noting that alternative preparation programs arguably move in the opposite direction, and they present the possibility that future principals will be merely managers and political operatives.
FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES


