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Myths and Poor Policy Affecting the Future of School Superintendents

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Myths and Poor Policy Affecting the Future of School Superintendents

Across the country, state policymakers are acting to weaken professional standards for school superintendents. Nine states no longer require a license for this position and among the remaining 41 states, over half (54%, including Ohio) have provisions for waivers or emergency certificates and 15 states (37%, including Ohio) sanction alternative preparation programs for licensure (Feistritz, 2003). Sadly, this trend toward de-professionalizing the most influential position in public education is being fueled by myths and unless it is curtailed, it will seriously damage our public education system.

The public's ambivalence toward treating superintendents and other educators as professionals is not new. Public school administrators always have faced the seemingly contradictory expectation that they make critical decisions based on professional knowledge and that they be held politically accountable to the community for those decisions (Shedd & Bacharach, 1991). Numerous authors (e.g., Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1987; Strike, 1993) have attributed this conflict to the inherent tensions between participatory democracy and pedagogic professionalism. Whereas democracy institutionalizes distrust, professionalism relies on trust (Sykes, 1991). Scholars who have examined this issue (Wirt & Kirst, 2001; Zeichner, 1991), however, conclude that accommodations can and should be made to alleviate these tensions.

Eliminating state licensing is justified if the knowledge base considered essential for practice is proven to be fraudulent or irrelevant (Kowalski, 2004). Recognizing this fact, the anti-professionists (those who seek to eliminate state licensing)¹ have attempted to convince state policymakers that school administrators are simply organizational managers. Equally noteworthy, they claim that traditional

preparation and licensing are actually deleterious because they are unnecessary criteria preventing highly qualified non-educators from becoming school administrators. To bolster their lobbying efforts, the anti-professionists have perpetuated the following myths:

- There is a critical shortage of superintendents.
- There is a cadre of former military officers and corporate executives who would become superintendents if spared the indignity of taking education courses.
- Professional preparation for school administration is unnecessary.

In truth, universities historically have produced more educators than were needed (Bliss, 1988). Though applicant pools have declined over the past 25 years, they remain relatively high (research shows average applicant pools to be about 20). Moreover, there is no compelling evidence that de-regulation will induce prominent non-educators to become superintendents. And even if this occurred, there is no evidence that these individuals will highly effectively in this demanding position (Kowalski, 2003).¹ Condemnations of professional preparation are nested in the hypothesis that generic management skills, regardless of the context in which they were acquired or previously applied, are easily transferable to schools (Kowalski, 2004). As an example, Hess (2003) brazenly referred to Thomas Sergiovanni's distinction between corporate management and educational leadership as a "simple-minded dichotomy" (p. 4).

The case for deregulation has been erected on mix of conjecture and anecdotal evidence, the latter acquired exclusively from big-city school districts. Normative practice for superintendents in Ohio and other states is not defined by urban practitioners. Less than 2% of the nation's school systems have 25,000 or more students but 71% enroll fewer than 2,500 students.

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Even more noteworthy, 48% of all districts enroll less than 1,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). If deregulation succeeds, political appointees will be able to assume the most influential position in public education; alas, many of them will be neither competent managers nor professional educators. And unlike non-traditional superintendents in Los Angeles or Chicago, they will not have hundreds of support personnel to compensate for their lack pedagogical knowledge.



Professors of school administration have a responsibility to dispel the myths that are threatening our public schools. We must act collectively to demonstrate why school administrators should be professional educators. Even more important, we must take the initiative to reform our programs to ensure that future superintendents can be education leaders, competent managers, astute statespersons, effective problem solvers, and skilled communicators.

Contributed by:
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¹ Examples of the anti-professionist views can be found in the following two publications: Broad Foundation & Thomas B. Fordham Institute. (2003) and Hess, F.M. (2003). Both are listed in the references.

¹ For a detailed analysis of the supply of qualified superintendents, see Kowalski (2003) listed in the references

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