

Preparing Principals for the Superintendency

By Dr. James M. Merrins and Dr. William D. Silky

Much has been written lately about the shortage of quality candidates aspiring to administrative leadership positions nationally and in New York State schools (Lazaroff, 1999; ERS, 1998; Barker, 1997). This past year, Commissioner Mills hosted a series of regional meetings that focused on leadership for the schools. While this attention is long overdue, the rhetoric must end and we must turn to the task of encouraging and identifying educators to aspire to administrative leadership positions and also improving existing preparation programs and crafting new options.

Status of Superintendent Preparation in New York

Principals provide the primary pool of applicants who will hopefully aspire to the superintendency. The existing system of administrator preparation is focused primarily on entry-level positions and not on the superintendency. Most current principals in the state are “certified” to become superintendents of schools, but not qualified—that is, they possess the School District Administrator certificate but not an understanding of the superintendency. Simply completing 60 graduate hours in education, 24 of which are in educational administration, plus an approved administrative internship (never as a superintendent), certifies an individual for the SDA. Completing SDA certification requirements in New York

does not require students to even complete one course in the superintendency. Consequently, one might ask, “How do principals learn the role of the superintendent?”

The primary methods of learning to be a school superintendent are through mentoring by their current superintendent and/or being hired in the role. Some principals are fortunate enough to work with a superintendent who is willing and able to give of her/his time to help the principal understand what it means to be a superintendent. This is usually accomplished through informal, unstructured conversations with the principal about what and why the superintendent is doing, feeling and thinking as they perform their role. More often than not, however, the principal learns the role of superintendent after acquiring her/his first position. In either case, leaving the preparation to chance is risky for the individual and the constituents they serve. In fact, this situation may be a deterrent to many who might otherwise chose this career path.

The Superintendent Development Program (SDP)

In 1996, the Western New York (WNY) Joint Management Team of BOCES district superintendents and the Educational Administration Department at Oswego State University began a joint effort to develop a program to identify

and prepare successful middle-level administrators for the superintendency. A planning team was formed consisting of two BOCES district superintendents, several local superintendents,² and Oswego State faculty. The team spent a year and a half crafting a pilot program that was subsequently marketed in 1997 and implemented in January of 1998. Following successful completion of the initial cohort (January-November 1998), a second cycle is being offered in Western New York (July 1999) and the program is being replicated in Central New York (August 1999). The remainder of this article briefly describes the Superintendent Development Program.

Assumptions

A number of assumptions underpin the design of the SDP:

- *Not all middle managers in education can make skillful school superintendents, therefore, not every one should be enrolled in the program.* Hence, there is an application and selection process to identify associates (the term used to describe the “students” in the program).
- *In addition to acquiring specific knowledge, skill and behavior becoming a school superintendent is a process of enculturation to the role.* It takes time to learn the role of superintendent, therefore the SDP is viewed as the first step in a three

1. Dr. Lionel Meno. District Superintendent of Erie 2 BOCES and Mr. John Grant. District Superintendent of the Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES were the primary initiators of this planning effort.

2. Including Dr. Charles Stoddart of Orchard Park CSD. Dr. Jim Coon of Fredonia CSD. Mr. Jim Mills of Silver Creek CSD. Ms. Linda Cimusz (Assistant Superintendent) of Williamsville CSD, and Dr. Jim Merrins formerly of Fredonia CSD.

phase. multi-year process in preparing for the superintendency.³

- The best way to enculturate associates to the role of the superintendent is to involve them in authentic learning experiences guided by experienced, successful superintendents. The curriculum of the SDP is primarily based on real problems (authentic issues) superintendents face in their job. The associates, working in teams, are guided by “field faculty” (practicing local superintendents) and other local school superintendents, in addition to college faculty. Each authentic issue is analyzed in terms of the curriculum framework for the program which includes four types of leadership the superintendent exerts (instructional, political, strategic, and organizational) and three environments in which the superintendent works (school, community and personal).

- Credibility for the program at all levels within the state and experience in preparing school administrators makes it essential for a higher education institution to be involved. The Educational Administration Department at Oswego State University has existed for approximately 30 years. Oswego brought experience in preparing administrators, authentic learning and credibility to the program. Associates earn nine graduate credit hours for the successful completion of the SDP.⁴

- *The success of the program can only be determined by the ultimate on-the-job performance of program graduates.* Unlike traditional measures of program success (completion rates, placement rates, grants received, publications, etc.), the SDP tracks its graduates to assess their readiness in the superintendency and their ultimate success in the role.

Program Design

Individuals interested in the SDP must submit to an application process. Criteria to evaluate each applicant require that he/she must be:

- a successful current middle-level school administrator;
- fully in charge of her/his building or administrative unit;
- respected by his/her superintendent, colleagues, and community;
- recognized by supervisors and colleagues as having the potential to enter the superintendency;
- on the cutting edge of several issues/initiatives;
- ethically and morally strong;
- ready to accept entering superintendency leadership; and
- in possession of, or qualified for, New York State School Administrator and Supervisor or School District Administrator certification.

In addition to completing an application, each prospective associate must provide a letter of interest, a resume and a list of professional references. Then, a member of the faculty (either a BOCES district

superintendent or a local superintendent) interviews each applicant. Finally, the full faculty in the geographic region discusses each individual applicant and determines if s/he meets the established criteria.⁵

The associates are organized into teams of from four to six associates per team. primarily according to geographic proximity, and two field faculty (local superintendents responsible to each team). The BOCES district superintendents serve as supervisors of the overall program in their region, directly advise teams of associates and are active participants in the sessions where all teams meet. College faculty work with each team. Due to the geographic dispersion of associates and teams, distance learning technology (video conferencing, e-mail and listserves) are used extensively to permit frequent, high quality interaction of faculty and associates.

The curriculum is organized primarily around the analysis of real problems (authentic issues) currently confronting local superintendents.⁶ This authentic learning approach involves the teams of associates and field faculty in working for an area superintendent to identify and resolve an issue that s/he is confronting in his/her district. The team’s job is to analyze the issue and provide the superintendent with a possible, well reasoned, informed direction. This is accomplished with much consultation of the faculty, research on the part of the team, and continuous communication with the local superintendent. The value of this issue analysis is through providing the associate with a window into the knowledge, thinking and feelings of the superintendent (both the one sponsoring the issue analysis and those on the faculty), and a window into the style of the superintendent and the culture of the superintendency. Three to five issues are analyzed during the year-

3. In Western New York, during a superintendent’s first year on the job a mentoring program called ‘Cycles of Success’ has been instituted. After this the new superintendent is encouraged to enroll in the New York State Council of School Superintendents’ Academy.
4. While it is recognized that most associates do not need additional graduate credit, the pilot program did include two principals who possessed on the SAS certification and needed the additional graduate credit for the SDA certificate.
5. It should be noted that traditionally underrepresented groups are given some special consideration in the application process.
6. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, constituent council for educational administration, has developed a framework for school programs of educational leadership. This framework has been used as a basis for the knowledge and skills for the SDP.

long study of the superintendency. In addition, superintendents in the geographic area participate in seminars, panels, and presentations offered on such topics as the impact of the superintendency on one's personal life, superintendent-board relations, school law and the superintendent. etc.

Assessment of participants is accomplished in several ways. First, at the outset of the program, all associates complete a self-assessment that was developed by the faculty. Second, associates must develop their educational platform (or beliefs) as a superintendent and present this to the faculty. Third, associates must submit periodic reflections on the superintendency to the faculty. Fourth, associates have to scan a district for which there is a superintendent vacancy and

present their findings to the faculty. The ultimate evaluation occurs if and when the associates have members of the faculty (local superintendents, BOCES district superintendents, and college faculty) sponsoring them for actual superintendent vacancies.

Program Evaluation

While it is somewhat premature to evaluate the initial effort, some indicators support the notion that the SDP is helping to cultivate middle managers for the superintendency.

- Two of the original associates in the pilot program are now in the superintendency and credit the SDP with helping prepare them for their role and in securing their current position.
- Two associates dropped out of the program after the first half year indicating that, after looking at the superintendency up close, it was not right for them.
- Interest has developed in another region of the state (Central New York) to replicate the program, which will begin this summer.

- Another SUNY institution has approached Oswego State about working collaboratively to enroll their students in the program.

Conclusion

Schools will need a large number of highly qualified superintendents in the decade ahead. Clearly, the best potential pool of future superintendents is current school principals, however there is a very weak preparation system in New York to help aspirants learn the superintendent role. Therefore, new preparation models need to be developed, such as the Superintendent Development Program.

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