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## ***Selection Process for Educational Leaders Does Make a Difference***

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### **Introduction**

Traditional principal preparation programs, those bound by a university degree, are sometimes viewed as theory-based and have little to do with the real world in which school leaders work. Even the licensing exam in some states, such as in Texas, asks the candidates to view each scenario as the ideal situation when selecting responses. Traditional preparation programs frequently meet the standards for national accreditation that indicates that the curriculum and assessments in these programs are subjected to rigorous scrutiny for quality control. The question remains, what should universities do to improve their programs or change the perception that the graduates of traditional graduate programs are ill-equipped to be effective leaders in today's schools? A 2012 report from the Wallace Foundation, *Districts Developing Leaders: Lessons on Consumer Actions and Program Approaches from Eight Urban Districts* by Margaret Terry Orr, Cheryl King, and Michelle La Pointe, provides insight into the efforts of eight school districts partnered with selected universities to develop leadership programs centered on district needs and improved quality of candidates for leadership positions.

The approaches used by the eight urban school districts varied, but the greatest potential impact for preparing graduates ready for school leadership came from "clarifying principal standards and collaborating with university-based preparation programs to change training" (*Knowledge in Brief*, The Wallace Foundation, October 2012, p. 2). Some of the benefits noted by the authors of the report included a higher quality principal preparation for districts because the training placed emphasis on matters important to the school districts. Universities mentioned in the study indicated that they benefitted from the collaboration with some financial rewards when students returned to complete degrees as well as an enhanced reputation by virtue of being selected to participate. Noted challenges of the collaboration included not having enough experienced professionals to serve as mentors and a disruption of initiatives when superintendents moved away.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether a rigorous selection process for educational leadership students would result in a more qualified educational leadership candidate than students who are accepted into an educational leadership program with a less rigorous selection

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process. Four educational leadership cohorts were used in this study. Three of the cohorts experienced a highly rigorous selection process that yielded 16 students out of 95 applicants for one cohort, 18 students out of 105 applicants for a second cohort, and 14 students out of 70 applicants for a third cohort. The fourth cohort included 15 students who experienced a less rigorous selection process and met a minimum GPA requirement and had a “get to know you” interview. All who applied were accepted into the program. In all cases, students received tuition support. In all cases, students worked in the same large, urban school district and received the same leadership course content.

### **The Need to be Selective**

The past decade has witnessed an increase in the need for school leaders. The Baby Boomer generation of educators has neared retirement age. Before the end of this decade, almost 10,000 Baby Boomers will leave the workforce, including those in positions of school leadership (The Motley Fool, 2016). This exodus necessitates preparing current teacher leaders with a university degree and/or standards-based licensure preparation coursework resulting in the creation of a highly-prepared, credentialed candidate pool. States and school districts have seen this coming for some time, however. In a 2005 report produced by Arthur Levine, then President of Teachers College at Columbia University, highlighted the study’s findings that predicted 40 percent of principals could potentially vacate their positions. Now, either due to retirement or job dissatisfaction, the need for strong school leadership continues to grow each year.

It is well noted that the principal is the most influential person in the school setting (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). According to a 2013 study, “highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year” (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). Principal leadership matters to student achievement. Strong, resourceful instructional leaders are needed to increase student achievement for all children and the future of the nation’s workforce.

The Wallace Foundation (June, 2012) states,

Preparing not just *more* aspiring principals, but the *right* ones, has to start when the first decisions are made about who should and should not be admitted to leadership training. Exemplary programs are far more rigorous than others in the review of candidates’ skills, experience and leadership dispositions (p. 8).

These programs are based on a multi-layered *selection* process, rather than the traditional *admission* process. It is the traditional reverse order of “admission, rather than selection” of candidates which continues to account for school performance stagnation (Browne-Ferrigno & Barber, 2010). Districts and universities must employ a selective recruitment matrix for aspiring school leaders, using rigorous performance criteria.

How principal preparation programs are developed, monitored and evaluated for effectiveness varies from program to program and state to state. Most states are unclear as to how selection criteria contribute to candidate and program success. In a 2012 study conducted by The Alliance to Reform Education Leadership (AREL) at the George W. Bush Institute, of its network of 28 principal preparation programs throughout the United States, it was noted that a lack of standardization and uniformity in how candidates are selected for leadership programs and how

graduates from these programs contribute to increased student achievement clearly exists (American Institute of Research, 2014). AREL also launched the Principal Policy State Survey during that same year. The survey gathered data from chief state school officers representing all 50 states and highlighted the conclusion that most are unclear as to how such programs garner approval from the state and what data is gathered to support improved principal quality and effectiveness (AREL, 2012).

### **The Response to a District Need**

In 2009 the need for highly effective school leaders to fill leadership roles in the schools of Texas' largest urban school district was a priority for new Houston ISD Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier. To ensure that future school leaders in the district were adequately prepared to increase student achievement, a new Leadership Development Department was established and charged with developing a "grow your own" program. As a result, a unique collaborative partnership with the University of St. Thomas was initiated. A Steering Committee, comprised of members from the Houston ISD's Leadership Development Department, representing varying levels and years of school leadership experience, and Professors and Deans from the School of Education and the Cameron School of Business from the University of St. Thomas was established. This Steering Committee met to develop and outline a degree program and rigorous multi-step selection process to select potential leadership candidates. School district Senior Managers and Assistant Superintendents collaborated with university educators to develop a rigorous selection matrix. The selection standards were employed to choose members of three of the four cohort groups discussed in this study for their respective degree programs.

### **The Selection Process**

Consistent with each cohort's selection process was a two-phase district selection process and university admissions process. The district's selection process included a nomination letter from the candidate's current principal/supervisor, verification of at least three years successful teaching experience as evidenced by the district's teacher appraisal and development system, an online leadership assessment of 13 dimensions of leader behaviors and ideologies predictive of strong leadership actions based on the work of Dr. Martin Haberman, (Haberman, 2006) a written essay reviewed by two different people, an in-basket style timed skills demonstration measuring problem solving, instructional leadership, written communication and data-analysis, and a structured behavioral interview to determine an exemplary caliber of leadership attributes. A matrix consisting of these selection criteria and corresponding point values was developed by the school district. The university requirements included an official application, including a transcript indicating a GPA of at least 2.75, and an interview with a university lead professor.

Selection and program accountability from districts and universities alike is critical, given the fact that in 2013 the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) adopted revised accreditation standards for university preparation programs that require more evidentiary data on graduates' effect on student achievement. Districts, under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and universities accredited by CAEP, are held to a higher standard of accountability for the leader's impact on student achievement, making the selection of potentially highly effective aspiring school leaders of paramount importance (NCLB, 2001). Districts and university partners need to hold each other accountable for the recruitment and selection of program candidates of the highest caliber and potential.

Once selected by the district and admitted by the university, new cohort members attended an orientation with district leaders and university personnel to overview the university's Master's degree program model, degree plan and monthly district-developed leadership seminars. These monthly district-led colloquia were delivered throughout the program's duration and focused on relevant leadership topics and district initiatives.

The selection process of the fourth cohort for HISD followed the university's traditional process of submitting a goal statement, having at least a 2.75 GPA, and undergoing an interview with the lead professor for the cohort. The degree for the fourth cohort is the Masters of Education in Special Education Leadership, a 36-hour master's degree that contains all of the same principal preparation courses as do the MBAE and the M.Ed. previously described. Five courses directed to special education are included in the degree plan. Significant to note here is that no applicant for this program was denied entrance. Also pertinent to note is that the tuition of all four cohorts described in this paper was subsidized by grant funds.

Table 1 provides a description of each cohort by ethnicity and gender. Cohorts 1, 2, and 3 include predominantly female students. Of the 60 students included in this study, 37% are white, 32% Black, 23% Hispanic, and 8% other.

Table 1  
*Ethnicity/Gender by Cohort*

Cohort/Ethnicity/Gender	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Male	Female
Group 1	5 (31%)	2 (13%)	7 (44%)	2 (13%)	6 (38%)	10 (62%)
Group 2	8 (47%)	6 (35%)	2 (12%)	1 (6%)	4 (24%)	13 (76%)
Group 3	6 (50%)	3 (25%)	3 (25%)	0	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
Group 4	3 (20%)	8 (53%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	11 (73%)

### **Development of the First Cohort's Program**

The university and school district worked collaboratively for approximately six months to create the MBAE program. A Steering Committee, comprised of professors from both the School of Education and Human Services (SEHS) and the Cameron School of Business and school district leaders was established. The committee developed and outlined respective standards-based objectives for the program. From that point, curriculum and assessments were aligned so as to ensure reaching the goals. For the special education leadership program a similar process was followed in that the Steering Committee made up of SEHS faculty and leaders from two school districts, identified goals for the program and determined which course would support the goals. The major difference between Groups 1, 2, 3, and Group 4 relates to the student selection process.

## Results

Groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 have graduated but not every student has taken the TExES Principal Exam because it is not required for the degree. Table 2 indicates that Group 1 has one student who did not pass the test on the first try; every student in Group 2 who attempted the exam passed on the first try. Eleven of the twelve students in Group 3 passed the exam on the first attempt. Group 4 has two students who attempted the exam two times before being successful on the third try. Group 4 has the largest range of scores with two students meeting the minimum standard of passing (240) and two students who scored 242. The lowest score for Groups 1 & 2 is 246, one student in Group 1 and two students in Group 2. Group 1 has the highest score that has ever been made in the last six years at UST, 293.

Table 2  
*TExES Scores*

Group	Average Score	Range of Scores
1	261 (n=12)	246-293
2	260 (n=11)	246-282
3	254 (n=12)	243-262
4	253 (n=14)	240-285

*TExES scores range from 240 (passing) to 300 (perfect score).*

Table 3 provides the average grade point average (GPA) for each cohort. The overall average GPA is higher for Group 4, the cohort without the rigorous selection process, than for Groups 1, 2, and 3. Seven of the 16 members of Group 4 earned the highest possible GPA, 4.0. One explanation for the higher GPA might be that 11 members of Group 4 already held a master's degree before entering this program, thereby giving them experience in graduate level work. Another possible explanation might be that the curriculum for Groups 1, 2, and 3 included material from another school at the university, material that was unfamiliar to most students. The curriculum for Group 4 included familiar material in the area that the students worked.

Table 3  
*Grade Point Average by Cohort*

Cohort	Average GPA	Range
Group 1 (48-hour program)	3.85 (n=16)	3.60 – 4.00 (3)
Group 2 (48-hour program)	3.79 (n=17)	3.29 – 4.00 (1)
Group 3 (36-hour program)	3.86* (n=12)	3.31 – 4.00 (4)
Group 4 (36-hour program)	3.93 (n=16)	3.69 – 4.00 (7)

*\*Group 3 has not finished the program.*

Table 4 shows the advancement of each cohort to date. While it is not noted in the chart, six of the 16 Cohort 1 members were promoted before finishing the program; seven were promoted in Cohort 2 before finishing and all six of those promoted in Cohort 3 have not yet finished the program. No one from Cohort 4 was promoted before finishing the program. The authors designated "promotion" as being moved to a position of leadership beyond the status of classroom teacher. In Cohort 2 two of the promotions were to campus principal. All of the promotions included assistant principal responsibilities and 10 of the promotions were as assistant principals.

Table 4  
*Promotions by Cohort*

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Number in Cohort</b>	<b>% Promoted</b>
Cohort 1	16	75 (12)
Cohort 2	17	65 (11)
Cohort 3	12	67 (8)
Cohort 4	16	25 (4)*

*\*Two left the district to be promoted.*

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this study include the lack of student achievement data in schools led by program graduates, the small sample size, the demographics, the different background of the participants, the lack of trend data on leader effectiveness as evidenced by principal evaluation matrices and other variables such as the availability of opportunity for promotion. Each of the three cohorts that were selected by rigorous standards progressed through similar, but not identical, courses of study. While each of the required educational courses were the same, the degree plan for Cohorts 1 and 2 included more business courses than the degree plan for Cohort 3. The business courses for the MBAE, the 48-hour master's program, were tailored to the needs of educational leaders and most, if not all, were taught by the same instructors. Limitations also include the longevity of the data collection to establish and support trends based on leadership preparation outcomes.

### **Summary**

The authors believe that their investigation shows that a rigorous selection process for educational leadership candidates is associated with a more qualified leadership candidate. Data from four groups of students who worked in the same school district and who received tuition support were compared. For each program the school district and the university collaboratively created the course work so as to meet the needs of the district. The major difference was that three of the cohorts (Groups 1, 2, and 3) were subjected to a rigorous screening process and one of the cohorts (Group 4) only had to meet the university requirements. From the data collected, the first three cohorts (Groups 1, 2, and 3) had higher average TExES scores, seven to eight points higher, than Group 4. Additionally, more students in Group 4 had to take the TExES more than one time to be successful. It is interesting to note here that the average GPA for Group 4 was higher than Groups 1, 2, and 3. The authors believe that this is due to the fact that 11 out of the 16 Group 4 members already had earned another master's degree and had previous graduate level work experience. Another explanation for the higher average GPA might be that the course work that included special education courses was familiar to Group 4 whereas the course work for Groups 1, 2, and 3 that included business management courses was new to nearly every student.

In addition to having higher average TExES scores, the rate of promotion was higher for Groups 1, 2, and 3 than for Group 4. As described above, many students in Groups 1, 2, and 3 were promoted to the assistant principal role or a similar role with similar responsibilities before they finished their program. None in Group 4 were promoted before completing the program and only four were promoted after finishing the program; two left the district for promotions.

## Recommendations

Further study of the four cohorts included in this study is warranted. While existing data shows that students who underwent a rigorous selection process had better performance on the TExES and a higher rate of promotion, the authors believe that the participants in this study should be tracked to see if longitudinal data supports a rigorous selection process. Other data that might be included for future investigation would include a survey from participants regarding their perception of the level of preparedness for their role as a school leader. In addition to a survey the authors plan to follow up with the cohorts identified in this study to review student success of students under their supervision.

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