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## Preparing Aspiring Superintendents to Lead School Improvement: Perceptions of Graduates for Program Development

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## Appendix H

Frequency Counts: Texas Accountability Ratings (AA, R, E) by Assessor Ratings of Principal NPBEA Skills (N = 259 assessor teams)

NBPEA Domains	Skills	(AA)	(R)	(E)	TOTAL RATINGS	Total By Domain
Functional Domain Skills	Leadership	71	59	7	137	365/714 (51%)
	Information Collection	45	39	7	56	
	Problem Analysis	16	12	5	33	
	Judgment	26	28	8	62	
	Organizational Oversight	37	29	11	77	
Programming Domain Skills	Instructional Management	34	20	3	57	204/714 (28.5%)
	Curriculum Design	27	2	0	29	
	Student Guidance & Development	27	14	15	56	
	Staff Development	13	6	8	27	
	Measurement & Evaluation	18	4	0	22	
	Resource Allocation	7	3	3	13	
Interpersonal Domain Skills	Sensitivity	48	36	7	91	145/714 (20.3%)
	Oral & Non-verbal Expression	20	15	2	37	
	Written Expression	8	6	3	17	

Note. /=divided by.

Preparing Aspiring Superintendents to Lead School Improvement:  
Perceptions of Graduates for Program Development

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Changes in the design and delivery of educational leadership preparation programs are advocated in order to meet the needs of leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> century schools (Byrd, 2001; Cox, 2002; McKerrow, 1998; Smylie & Bennett, 2005). The changing needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, coupled with accountability standards and more diverse populations of students within school districts, create challenges for leaders who are attempting to increase student achievement (Firestone & Shippy, 2005; Schlechty, 2008). Further, student performance demands have increased at the state and national level because of the No Child Left Behind Act (Wong & Nicotera, 2007). These standards have thus increased the emphasis of the administrator's responsibility to positively impact student achievement (Taylor, 2001). With the graying of the profession and the need for exemplary school superintendents, the preparation of school superintendents who can successfully lead school improvement is vitally important (Lashway, 2006). According to the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002), university preparation programs should seek current leaders' perspectives of critical content components and the processes to be used in the preparation of educational leaders who can lead school improvement practices and processes.

This qualitative multi-case study identified nine practicing superintendents through purposeful sampling in order to attain their perspectives of critical practices and processes of school improvement, recommendations for educational leadership preparation programs, and

strengths of one particular university's program for the preparation of school superintendents. Interviews were conducted with the nine superintendents who met the criteria identified for the study. These criteria were school superintendents who had been recognized as successful leaders of school improvement designed to achieve increased learning for students, graduates of a specific university preparation program, and representative of diverse rural, urban, and suburban schools. In the process, seven elements were identified as critical practices and processes in achieving school improvement for increased student learning, and implications for superintendent preparation programs were explored.

#### Conceptual Framework

Calls for reform of educational leadership preparation programs have been advanced for over a decade (Murphy, 1992). The use of problem-based learning and real life experiences to teach content, as opposed to primarily lecture-based delivery of course content, have been recommended for educational leadership preparation programs (Kochan & Reed, 2005). Murphy (1992) argues that university educational leadership preparation programs have traditionally placed too much emphasis on theory, management issues, irrelevant content, and poor performance standards instead of focusing on school improvement. Rost (1991) further criticizes traditional leadership theories built around an industrial age model, such as, trait-factor theory and contingency theories that are often included in texts used in educational leadership preparation programs. Rost (1991) argues,

These summaries of leadership theory movements are ritualistically repeated by author after author, especially textbook writers. As with other things that are repeated over and over, people begin to accept them as facts. These movements are part of the folklore of leadership studies and,

like other folktales and myths, they are believed because leadership high priests have told us they are true. (pp. 17-18)

Sergiovanni (1996) argues, in his book entitled, *Leadership for the School-House*, that the roles of educational leaders differ from the roles of business leaders. Crow and Grogan (2005) further suggest that our understanding of leadership needs to extend beyond the corporate world to a broader understanding of the complexity of school leadership. In providing a critique of the educational leadership thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Crow and Grogan (2005) argue that many of the traditional educational leadership theories were influenced by industrial and management literature.

For educational leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Starratt (2005) reinforces the importance of genuineness or authenticity in successful educational leadership. Donaldson (2006) provides a three-pronged metaphor for educational leadership emphasizing the three streams of relational, purposive, and mobilizing to action dimensions. Donaldson (2006) defines leadership as "the mobilization of people to adapt a school's practices and beliefs so that every child's learning and growth is optimized" (p. 3). He further argues that leadership is "a relationship that mobilizes people to fulfill the purpose of education" (p. 47). For successful relationships, authenticity is a pivotal factor as well as trust (Sergiovanni, 2007).

The new essential skills for school leaders include leading consensus, developing an academic school culture, engaging all stakeholders, and data analysis (Bellamy G.T., Fulmer, C.L., Murphy, M.J., & Muth, R., 2007). The superintendent serves a primary role in building a culture of academic achievement within the district (Fullan, 2001, 2005; Hoyle et al., 2005).

### Implications for Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

In preparing school leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Levine (2005) identified several important elements for program evaluation of administrative leadership preparation programs including continual assessment for improving each candidate's performance as a school leader. In the process of improving university preparation programs, advisory committees have also been advocated to ascertain practitioners' perspectives of needs in the preparation of school leaders. Educational leadership program professors are encouraged to listen to stakeholders to collaboratively design preparation programs that meet 21<sup>st</sup> century needs in order to contribute to preparation program improvement (NCATE 2002). Hoyle (2005) recommends several ways that leadership preparation programs could meet the needs of the profession and enhance the practices of school leaders. He supports involving practitioners in the preparation of future superintendents. Hoyle advocates partnerships between professors and practicing administrators as a means for strengthening preparation programs.

### Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify critical elements for achieving school improvement in academic performance from the perspective of school superintendents who had led successful academic school improvement processes in diverse settings in order to identify their recommendations for content delivery in a superintendent preparation program and to identify strengths of the current program. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. What are the critical elements for superintendents as leaders of school improvement in order to improve student learning?
2. What are implications for content delivery in a superintendent preparation program?

3. What are the key strengths of one particular university's superintendent preparation program?

This study was designed to listen to the voices of superintendents as part of a preparation program improvement process in order to strengthen the university superintendent preparation program. Qualitative research methodology was selected as appropriate because the researchers sought to identify participants' perceptions of preparation needed for their roles (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) further elaborates that a reason to use qualitative research is to examine organizations from the perspective of people within the organization. Through a purposeful sampling process, nine school leaders who had graduated from one university's superintendent preparation program and were currently school superintendents who had led successful school improvement processes, had successfully influenced an increase in the academic performance of students, and represented urban, suburban, and rural school district were selected to share their perspectives relative to the research questions. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this qualitative multi-case study since "the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Thick-rich description attained from the interviews served to enhance understanding of the findings relative to each research question.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, and the responses from the participants were recorded. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through open and axial coding to discern emergent themes. Trustworthiness of the data was maintained by member checks and by keeping an audit trail of all transcriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Member checks were attained during the interview process as the interviewers asked for further clarification when meanings were unclear. Establishing accuracy in description and

interpretation was a critical skill needed in data analysis, and a process of peer debriefing ensured the accuracy of identification of the themes. The study was emergent in that answers to questions led to new questions without following a rigid design (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

The ultimate strengths of the qualitative study were its contributions to knowledge and usefulness. Marshall and Rossman (1989) state that a qualitative study is significant in three ways: (1) by contributing to knowledge, (2) by usefulness and meaning to relevant policy areas, and (3) by its usefulness to practitioners. The present study was designed to meet all three goals. Through analysis of the data sources and the identification of common themes, patterns were discerned and a clearer understanding of critical elements in preparing aspiring superintendents was attained. It was projected that these findings would be useful in furthering understanding of ways to better prepare future superintendents.

### Findings

This section examines the findings from each of the three research questions. Critical elements in school leadership will be discussed followed by a discussion of recommendations for superintendent preparation programs. Strengths of one university's program will also be shared.

#### Critical Elements in School Leadership

Content analysis of the interviews conducted in this research yielded seven critical elements in school leadership for increased student learning. The elements were: 1) ethical leadership; 2) a focus on teaching and learning; 3) strong communication skills; 4) problem solving skills; 5) finance skills; 6) an understanding of change; and 7) human resource management. Each will be discussed as follows.

*Ethical leadership.* As one administrator shared, "Ethical leaders are needed who have a genuine love and concern for students." This genuine concern will serve as the driving force for a positive vision of school improvement. Authenticity is reflected when actions mirror words that are spoken. As another superintendent stressed, "The superintendent must have character and integrity." Another superintendent reinforced, "Everything is a function of leadership. If the superintendents say they will do something, they must do as they say." The authentic leader models integrity and commitment, advocates for students, and works to achieve both equity and excellence.

*A focus on teaching and learning.* All superintendent interviewees supported accountability systems and a leadership responsibility to provide equity and excellence for all students. However, they had differing views on instructional leadership. Three of them expressed that the teachers are the primary instructional leaders while the remainder supported a belief that the superintendent's role included directly promoting teaching and learning. As one superintendent noted, "Superintendents need to understand instruction and have direct involvement in instructional decisions."

Another superintendent emphasized, "Decisions must be data driven and student centered, based on what is best for students." The other three superintendents expressed that educational leaders should foster decentralized leadership where the experts in the field are viewed as the instructional specialists. All interviewees reinforced that superintendents must understand the accountability system and serve as leaders of equity and excellence for all students in order to maintain a clear focus on the improvement of teaching and learning.

*Communication skills.* Just as the superintendent has been described as the “lead learner”, he or she should be the primary communicator of an educational vision. As one superintendent stressed, “The superintendent must communicate the expectations and values.” As communicator, the interviewees emphasized that communication skills include the dissemination of information, yet communication is fostered by the ability to build strong relationships with all stakeholders including the community members, teachers, administrators, business leaders, board members, and students. Communication skills include an ability to facilitate meetings with collaborative groups. The skills are also vital in facilitating productive school board member relationships. Board meetings, parent and community meetings, district site-based planning meetings, and district newsletters are examples of the many avenues open to the superintendent for communication of the school’s mission and goals (Duffy, 2004). One of the superintendents commented, “The greatest finesse a superintendent can have is the ability to bond people together with his/her philosophy and lead them. They can de-escalate situations so they don’t become public with a level of implementation where everybody wins.”

Inherent in communication skills is the ability to relate the district’s vision and mission as well as sharing the district’s message of academic achievement (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Communication skills include the dissemination of information, building shared relationships with a variety of stakeholders, facilitating meetings, and presenting information through a variety of venues, such as, radio and newsletters (Duffy, 2004). One superintendent commented, “What and how I communicate is different dependent on the size of the district.” Yet, all superintendents in this study agreed that visibility was important. One superintendent commented,

Even in large districts, the staff wants to see you. I have 28 schools, and they want to see me. I have learned that it is when you see them that is most critical. They will all see you if you drop in during conference week. You need to be in the spot where they can see you.

One superintendent stated, “The superintendent must communicate the expectations and values.” Another superintendent stressed the usefulness of writing skills gained in the preparation program to foster growth in their staff and to develop action plans with their administrators and school boards. One superintendent commented, “The superintendent’s job requires common sense and the ability to deal with people from all walks of life and to speak to them on their level.” Further, all participants in this study emphasized the need to understand the legal framework of school district issues and the continued advocacy for what is best for all students.

*Problem-solving skills.* Problem-solving involves collaboration and knowledge of best practices. Deal and Peterson (1999) refer to the paradox of leadership and the artistry of it, suggesting that problems do not have easy answers. The nine participants reinforced that the superintendent must be willing “to make the hard decisions.” They emphasized the role of superintendents as problem solvers and stressed that the superintendent must understand both finance and the change process.

They noted that leaders need to analyze problems from multiple perspectives. One superintendent explained that he employed analytical skills in taking information and looking at it in relation to experiences or different research studies. The participants noted that finding critical questions and issues were part of their roles as superintendents. Another superintendent commented,

Superintendents need to have command of all components of the job, not just certain pieces. In a world in which our rules are changing on a daily basis, it is the ability to problem solve and project what you are going to do in two years when you don't know the rules.

*Finance.* As problem-solvers, the superintendents recognized that sound financial management of a school includes leveraging resources in addition to seeking funds, budgeting and utilizing funds wisely. Throughout the interviews of these practicing superintendents, it was apparent that their recommendations for school financial management includes leveraging resources to meet needs in addition to seeking new sources of revenue. Understanding the budgeting process and using resources both efficiently and effectively were emphasized. One superintendent stated, "You never hear of superintendents being fired for any other reason than they lost so much money. The crucial key is managing money and making sure the district has the revenue to run the school."

*Change process.* As superintendents seek to meet the challenges of equity and excellence for all students along with the elimination of achievement gaps among different socioeconomic groups of students, superintendents look for areas where policies, practices, and processes serve as inhibitors or barriers to achieving the school's vision (Duffy 2004). One participant in this study stated, "We have been taught to be change leaders in the right way, and I am thankful for that." Throughout this study, superintendents emphasized the importance and significance of leading change processes within their districts. One superintendent stated, "All decisions need to be based on what is best for students. If you can keep that in mind, you will make the right decisions." Another superintendent emphasized, "You won't get meaningful change unless you ground your decisions on research." One superintendent stated, "We are now in a risk

environment. You have to take the risks to survive." This reality was supported by an expressed need for providing support to the administrative team. A superintendent commented, "The superintendent needs to understand how to lead an administrative team. The superintendent's job is to be the instructional leader for the principals."

*Human resource management.* Another key element that was identified by superintendents was that of human resource management. Using the metaphor provided by Collins (2001) in the book, *Good to Great*, the nine interviewees emphasized that great leaders have the right people in the right places to achieve school improvement in academic performance. All nine superintendents emphasized that great leaders choose the right people and place them in positions to lead efforts to achieve school improvement in academic performance. As one superintendent stated, "The superintendent must hire great leaders." The successful school superintendent assists all faculty members in the district to ensure that professional development is provided. He or she is responsible for developing "organizational learning", added another superintendent. Another superintendent stated, "Superintendents need people skills and recognize the right people to do the job. They need the courage to hire the right person." A successful superintendent leads the school in formulating a shared vision that is centered on the improvement of learning for a culture of academic achievement (Fullan, 2001). He or she provides resources for district and campus initiatives for professional development to promote attainment of the school's vision. Further, one superintendent stated, "A superintendent needs the ability to identify another person's strengths and to design the responsibilities around those strengths. The emphasis needs to be on picking the right people and then analyzing their strengths." Another superintendent emphasized,

When you become the superintendent, you are the coach. Everybody is a team player. The janitorial staff has the building clean so it looks good. The bus drivers say good morning to the students every time they get on the bus with a smile. You have to orchestrate all these actions.

#### **Recommendations for Content Delivery in a Superintendent Preparation Program**

In providing recommendations for superintendent preparation programs, increased internships and simulation experiences with an emphasis on developing reflective practitioners were emergent themes found in the data. All participants recommended that superintendent candidates engage in “real world” experiences as part of their preparation program. As one superintendent expressed, “As much time in real life situations as possible is needed.” He further explained that this could include attending school board meetings, administrative team meetings and conducting action research projects within their school districts. These real world experiences could also be gained through quality internship experiences and realistic case studies within classroom experiences. The participants also encouraged the use of practitioners as speakers within the preparation classes.

The participants stressed the importance of the internship in preparing school leaders. Consistent with NCATE recommendations for a full semester internship in addition to field experiences within courses, superintendents stressed that projects, such as budget preparation, are needed instead of internships consisting of job shadowing. As one interviewee stated, “Expect active participation and high quality work from candidates.” The research participants also emphasized the importance of providing experiences wherein the aspiring superintendent could practice group facilitation skills and teamwork. To establish “buy-in” to school improvement, stakeholders must have a role in planning the initiatives. The superintendents

encouraged preparation program faculty to assist aspiring superintendents in the use of tools for group processes, such as, nominal group techniques and force field analysis as decision making tools for reaching consensus. Scenario-based instruction using hypothetical situations that superintendents face was listed, such as: working with angry and difficult constituents, conducting a public hearing on the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and school report cards, preparing board packets for a board meeting, preparing financial statement for the board, analyzing the conditions of facilities, dealing with the media in crises situations, and evaluating the educational needs of the district. One superintendent stated, “The university professors need to instill in all their students that a superintendent is a support person in a district, so they will understand that the superintendents help people do a better job while being the spokesperson and public relations person for the district.”

#### **Key Strengths of One Superintendent Preparation Program**

The need for leaders of urban schools who possess unique knowledge and skills compared to their suburban or rural school counterparts has surfaced. Texas, for example, has over 1,036 separate individual districts. Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, Corpus Christi, and Austin are major cities reflective of needs found in urban schools throughout the nation, such as, high drop-out rates and schools with less than satisfactory performance ratings. Changing demographics bring additional challenges to schools of all sizes as educators design programs to meet the needs of English language learners. The preparation of educational leaders who can successfully respond to these multiple needs is of utmost importance (Reyes & Wagstaff 2005).



While criticisms of educational leadership programs, such as Levine's (2005) study have been widely publicized, the merits of programs have not been largely discerned. The interviewees stressed that the primary strength of the current program at this regional university was that experienced professors with practitioner experience merged theory and practice to develop scholar-practitioners who would be successful in urban, rural, or suburban settings. Structural features that also strengthened the program included the cohort structure wherein a network of support is established. Students proceed through the program as a cohort of no more than fifteen individuals, while establishing close relationships with site mentors through faculty visits to internship sites.

#### Discussion

Increasingly, calls for changes in educational leadership preparation programs include the recommendation of a focus on improving teaching and learning (Prestine & Nelson, 2005). Leaders for school improvement need preparation in leadership and management to strengthen the attainment of teaching and learning goals including an ability to look at needs from many perspectives (Bellamy, et al., 2007).

Colleges of education have a moral responsibility to candidates, schools, and communities to prepare leaders who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to lead schools in the improvement of teaching and learning (Sergiovanni, 2007). In this global economy, 90% of the fastest growing jobs will require postsecondary education, and students must be prepared in order to enter the workforce in higher skilled jobs (Spellings, 2007). Ultimately, rather than just preparing students to enter the workforce, schools must also consider that a fundamental purpose of schools is to prepare an educated citizenry for the preservation of democracy (Kochan & Reed, 2005). Superintendents must be prepared to meet all of these diverse needs.

In the 1970's, the leaders of schools were charged to serve as instructional leaders. This concept received strong criticism in the 1990's as the term was criticized as indicative of an all-knowing leader who would mandate instructional processes and serve as the authority on knowledge. Instead, educational leaders should foster distributed leadership whereby the experts in the field are viewed as content specialists (Elmore, 2005).

Successful school superintendents serve as the primary communicators of the mission and vision of the district and use their platform as school leaders as opportunities to share the district's message of equity and excellence in academic achievement (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). AASA (2008) challenges superintendents to serve as champions for the cause of quality education available to all children.

As part of problem solving, the superintendents emphasized that they must understand the change process. As they seek to meet the challenges of equity and excellence for all students and the elimination of the achievement gap, successful superintendents look for areas wherein the policies, practices, and processes serve as inhibitors or barriers to achieving the school's vision (Duffy, 2004). Successful school superintendents recognize the importance of analyzing an improvement effort holistically to determine systemic issues that may serve to strengthen or inhibit the attainment of the goals (Pelavin & Kane, 1990). Interviewees stressed the importance of data analysis in problem solving to strengthen school improvement in academic performance.

Smylie and Bennett (2005) argue, "School leader development is getting a lot of attention these days. . . . First, it has become increasingly clear how important leadership is to school improvement and effectiveness" (p. 138). Traditional superintendent preparation programs have been criticized for emphasizing theory rather than field-based, relevant practical issues related to the improvement of student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2006). Recommendations for re-

designed programs stress the importance of extensive internship experiences with assigned mentors to guide novice superintendents in learning the knowledge and skills that are required for school improvement to promote increased academic achievement (NCATE 2002).

To develop superintendents who will serve as advocates for student learning, professors in this redesigned superintendent preparation program have emphasized new role conceptions for superintendents based on practices and processes illustrated by school superintendents who have been effective in promoting teaching and learning initiatives to enhance academic achievement. Professors of educational leadership programs can contribute to evaluation efforts of preparation programs by participating in a dialogue about the meaning of leadership and critically examining content and delivery systems of leadership courses. Our analysis of superintendents' perspectives of this leadership preparation program offers an example of ways to include current practicing superintendents' recommendations as part of the process of defining leadership and the delivery of content in other universities' superintendent preparation programs.

#### **Program Evaluation**

For university faculty to determine needed changes, a concurrent evaluation process was important in understanding the needs for this unique preparation program. The program did not stop while faculty members made determinations of necessary changes for candidates in the program. This assessment was a continual and cyclical process for professors and program designers in order to be in constant evaluation for improvement. There were many standards to weave together in order to make sure that the courses matched the recommendations of different professional organizations. For example, this superintendent program wove together standards from the state of Texas for superintendent certification, the ELCC standards, the College of Education's core values and standards, and the ISLLC standards. While many of these standards

overlapped, analyzing each of the standards enabled a view of what was lacking in the current program. A re-alignment of coursework goals was determined with problem-based assignments that were both reflective of the standards and required reflective thought on the part of candidates in real-life experiences for superintendents. The goal was to blend theory with practice.

The scholar-practitioner model of this university's superintendent preparation program applied theory to practice by including the incorporation of the college's core values of openness, integrity, lifelong learning, collaboration, service, and academic excellence. The model promoted candidates' reflections on their practices by examining the practices against concepts of democracy, caring, and equity in order to provide the necessary leadership to guarantee that all students receive the education they so desperately need.

How do university preparation programs ensure that future superintendents are equipped with the skills to serve as the instructional leaders for a district? They must help guide leaders in the critically reflective practice of understanding pertinent theories and blending them into actual practice. This reflective practice can serve as a critical part of problem-based learning.

How do university professors and program designers prioritize problem-based learning for candidates preparing to be superintendents? Data driven decision making served as an avenue for addressing this question. For example, first, faculty members conducted an analysis of the standards to determine the standards endorsed by professional organizations and accreditation agencies. Then, the faculty members analyzed local data including the values and beliefs of the college and department. Graduates were interviewed to gain input from the stakeholders who had completed the program and found success as school superintendents. After

analyzing the data, faculty addressed the alignment of courses, assignments, and assessments to determine how well they matched the standards, values, and input from the stakeholders.

This continual improvement process was strengthened through the lens of critical reflection of the practices. The analysis reported in this paper serves as an example of data driven analysis for evaluating a preparation program. The nine superintendent/interviewees provided recommendations for follow-up to make sure that the superintendent program continues to be updated to reflect best practices. They shared valuable insights of the program needs, and their knowledge base gave relevancy to the program's evaluation.

#### Conclusion

The superintendents in this study identified ethical leadership, a focus on teaching and learning, communication skills, problem solving skills, finance, change process, and human resource management as critical elements in the school improvement process for enhanced student learning. They recommended that each of these elements be included in superintendent preparation programs.

They also recommended emphasizing real world experiences, such as, conducting action research projects in their school districts and the use of case study problem solving simulations which would help the future superintendents learn important skills which would assist them in successfully meeting the challenges within the position. They stressed that internship experiences combine theory and practice into high quality, real life experiences and that maintaining a regular practice of reflective journal writing about their day to day experiences would be beneficial to both practicing and future superintendents.

With the aging of many current superintendents, the preparation of aspiring leaders becomes vital (Lashway, 2006). The current stress of this position with its multiple responsibilities requires that leaders are prepared to meet the multiple challenges (Bellamy et al., 2007; Smith & Piele, 2006). Schlechty (2001) emphasizes, "The world of the year 2000 is less like the world of 1950 than the world of 1950 was like the world of 1850" (p. 36). Schlechty (2001) further argues that schools must produce different results than previously expected. It is vital that superintendent preparation programs develop candidates' knowledge, dispositions, and skills in such a way that they will be successful as school superintendents.

Traditional superintendent preparation programs have been criticized for emphasizing industrial and management concepts rather than field-based, relevant practical issues related to the improvement of student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2006). Recommendations for re-designed programs stress the importance of extensive internship experiences, with assigned mentors, to guide novice superintendents in learning the knowledge and skills that are required for school improvement to promote increased academic achievement (NCATE, 2002).

With the current accountability system in many districts, if the superintendents are not effective in improving student achievement, they will be removed as district leaders (Firestone & Shippis, 2005; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). Candidates' future job security rests in large part on their ability to serve as effective school leaders for school improvement. The challenges of school leadership are many. Aspiring superintendents in university preparation programs must be prepared to serve as transformative, multi-faceted leaders in school districts. To achieve this goal, assessment for ongoing improvement of preparation programs is vital. This study illuminated the voices of nine successful school superintendents who identified critical elements in leadership of school improvement for academic success, key recommendations for preparation

program delivery, and current strengths of one superintendent preparation program. Their voices contributed to a collective understanding of ways to strengthen superintendent preparation programs to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools.

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### **An Investigation of Principals' Use of Data in Data-Driven Decision-Making and the Impact on Student Achievement**

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The passage and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) ushered in a new era of educational accountability and school improvement. Schools are held accountable to meet adequate yearly progress that requires educators to closely monitor student performance on high-stake assessments. Further, NCLB significantly increases the pressure on states, districts and schools to collect, analyze and report data. Accountability demands are increasingly forcing school leaders to explore student-level data and to complete more sophisticated analyses. Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) has become an emerging field of practice for school leadership (Streifer, 2002) and a central focus of education policy and practice (Mandinach, Honey, & Light, 2006). Nationwide standards-based control and outcome-based funding have brought DDDM to the top of every principal's agenda (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001).

The extensive use of DDDM in policy and practice at schools reveals a strong need for research on the current realities of DDDM practices and how those practices impact student achievement. DDDM is a critical issue in both practice and research, yet surprisingly little empirical research has actually been conducted on these issues, especially from the principal's perspective (Luo, 2008). In addition, university preparation programs are facing increased scrutiny as principals are facing new roles and heightened expectations, requiring new forms of training. In particular, the demand that principals have a positive impact on student achievement challenges traditional assumptions, practices, and structures in leadership preparation programs (Lashway, 2003). In fact, there is little evidence that current coursework in traditional preparation programs directly connects practices to principals' on-the-job performance or to