

Leadership and Learning



A HECHINGER INSTITUTE PRIMER FOR JOURNALISTS



THE
Hechinger Institute
ON EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA
Teachers College, Columbia University



To Cover a School District, Examine the Leaders

To journalists, education leadership is like air: It is invisible and can go unnoticed, but its absence is painfully obvious. Managers can cause movement. But only good leadership, like the steady breeze that fills a sail, causes movement toward a destination.

The point is this: Journalists who cover school districts cover leaders. They cover their decisions, controversies, personalities, salaries, perks, peccadilloes, and comings and goings. But the leadership of superintendents and principals usually is seen only indirectly, through coverage of news events, trends, and controversies. This primer argues that journalists miss great stories by not asking explicitly who made something happen, how they did it, by what means, how the change fits into a larger vision, and how they got others on board.

Here is an example: District test scores rise two years in a row. The actual scores will be on the state Web site. Reporting on why the scores went up is something only journalists can do. Did they go up because the school was ordered to complete weeks of test preparation drills on sample questions? Or did they go up because leaders encouraged teachers to examine their lessons, make changes to reflect state standards, and work with their principal, colleagues, and experts to address any weaknesses in their methods? Did the superintendent hold the principal accountable and the principal hold teachers accountable for results? To paraphrase the words of Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond, did the district's leaders create conditions enabling teachers to use what they know and give them opportunities to learn more? Finally, and perhaps most important, what did the leader do to inspire educators to make his or her quest their own?

Once reporters start asking those questions, they may find that only some of the leaders they cover actually lead. Journalists also may want to learn how education leaders are prepared and what a district (or state) is doing to ensure leaders are up to the task.

This goal of this primer is to give journalists an overview of these issues. Why is this important? As veteran education journalist Bill Graves of *The Oregonian* in Portland says: "I've never found a high-achieving school that was not led by a high-performing principal. These leaders are not always charismatic or dynamic, but they always have a passion about seeing all students succeed. They help their teachers find good reform strategies and then inspire them to make the reforms work."

We as journalists should be able to recognize when this kind of leadership is in the air – and when it's not.

Richard Lee Colvin
Director, Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media

On the cover: Paul G. Vallas holds one of the toughest and most challenging school leadership jobs in the United States: superintendent of the Recovery School District in New Orleans, post-Katrina. Here, he speaks with reporters in Philadelphia, one of several high-profile school districts he has led. Vallas also served as chief executive officer of Chicago schools from 1995 to 2001. Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Inquirer

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Why School and District Leadership Matters

To improve teaching and learning, districts need visionary superintendents and principals. Journalists who can spot that quality – or its absence – will add depth to their stories.

By Richard Lee Colvin

Kati Haycock, the head of the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group Education Trust, is known as an engaging sermonizer about the crucial connection between high-quality teaching and educational equity. But at a national conference in New York in fall 2007, she emphasized the role of leaders. “The most devastating lessons in the education of poor children and children of color



Linda Darling-Hammond
Stanford University
School of Education
Leadership “enables
teachers to be effective.”

... flow from the choices that we educators make,” she told the conference on leadership organized by The Wallace Foundation. “The choices about what to expect of whom. Choices about what to teach to whom. And, perhaps the most devastating choice of all, the choice of who teaches whom.”¹

The conference keynote speaker was Stanford University researcher Linda Darling-Hammond. Since 1996, Darling-Hammond has been a tireless voice arguing that to improve the quality of education, the United States

must invest in increasing the knowledge and skills of teachers and create working conditions that enable them to do their best work. “Substantial headway on the teaching agenda” has been made, she said. The “importance of teachers is widely acknowledged, and many successful

innovations in teacher recruitment, preparation, mentoring, and professional development have been launched.” But she, too, told the audience of researchers, principals, superintendents, and political leaders that good teaching depends on good leaders.

“It is the work they do that enables teachers to be effective – as it is not just the traits that teachers bring, but their ability to use what they know in a high-functioning organization that produces student success,” she said. “And it is the leader who both recruits and retains high-quality staff – indeed, the No. 1 reason for teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support – who must develop this organization.”²

School reform has been a central theme of education journalism for more than 25 years – ever since the “Nation at Risk” report in 1983 warned Americans that many schools were not serving students or the nation well. Since then journalists and educators have seen reforms come and go. More graduation requirements, demanding standards, new approaches to reading and math, smaller classes, smaller schools, double-period classes, more testing, teacher testing, charter schools, vouchers, new uses for technology and many other strategies have been introduced to the educational landscape.

MAKING REFORMS WORK

It’s possible to find schools where each of these reforms has made a difference. Yet, overall progress remains disappointing. Haycock, Darling-Hammond and other scholars remind policy-makers that any reforms that do not improve the quality of teaching and increase learning are almost beside the point. And the key to whether well-designed reforms achieve their aim is often the quality of leadership in a school or district. The goal of this primer is to help journalists consider and report on the important role of leadership in whether schools succeed.

After teacher quality, the second

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

It’s subtle, complex, and not always easy to write about leadership, especially when your editor likens it to “watching paint dry.” But the issue of school leadership percolates up in stories about education again and again, be it a rural superintendent who forges ahead with universal preschool or a school that embraces a new math program. Sometimes it expresses itself quickly, or indirectly, in a quote or a classroom exchange. Other times it’s woven throughout a story. But always it is a challenge to capture in a meaningful way for readers – and for skeptical, hard-to-impress editors.

**NANCY RODRIGUEZ,
(LOUISVILLE) COURIER-JOURNAL**





biggest influence on student achievement is the quality of school leadership. On average, about a quarter of a school's effect on learning is attributable to the quality of leadership, according to Kenneth Leithwood, a researcher at the University of Toronto in a 2004 report.³ The difference leadership can make is “considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances. Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader.”

The quality of leadership in a district or a school, good or bad, is often worthy of a story on its own. But the quality of leadership also is an element to consider including – or at least asking about – in every story. Closing schools, opening schools, negotiating a teachers union contract, deciding how to allocate federal dollars meant for helping disadvantaged students, imposing new accountability measures, cutting the budget, working to close the achievement gap, revamping the teaching of math or reading – virtually every story a journalist covers can be made more authoritative and interesting by asking about the acts of leadership involved in success or failure.

Let's say a superintendent announces an effort to improve math achievement but then fails to do anything other than authorize the purchase of a set of textbooks with a new instructional approach. He doesn't explain the changes to principals, teachers or parents; increase spending on teacher training; measure progress; or make provisions for helping students who have trouble adjusting. The result would be a case of educational fraud – surely as interesting as stories about financial malfeasance. On the other hand, the chronicle of a superintendent helping principals learn to be skillful instructional mentors for their teachers would help readers and listeners understand the hard work that improving student achievement requires.

The uncertainty in the news business means that reporters are under greater pressure than ever before to produce more stories, faster and tighter. It's tempting, therefore, for journalists to just cover the press conference to announce test scores or announce a new initiative. The story of leadership is almost always about what happens before or after the press conference. Telling that story requires learning more about the work of educational leaders, visiting some schools, asking probing questions to get at what's been done or not done to bring about changes in teaching. In doing so, journalists add value and become more than stenographers.

“After more than a decade of reporting on education, I am more and more aware of a growing disconnect between expectations and capacity,” said Scott Stephens

What a Journalist Should Ask About Leadership

Scott Stephens' suggestion is excellent: When reporting on what a school district is trying to do, don't forget to ask how the district's leadership will execute its plan and who will be responsible for the success of the program or strategy. Nothing happens unless it's someone's job to make it happen. How will that person be held accountable? Here are some other questions to ask about leadership of proposed school reforms:

- Are principals prepared to lead the strategy? What will be done to make sure they are? Ask the same question about teachers.
- Then there's the money question: Is money being moved from elsewhere to support this new idea? Is it enough? And what do those involved on the money-losing side think about it?
- Ask the superintendent and school board members what data they will use to evaluate the success of a reform program. Will gathering the data require extra effort? Who's responsible for that task? Who will analyze the data? Will that person be trained for the task? Will he or she be given the time?
- As Patricia Harvey suggests, ask how every reform plan will serve the interests of students who need extra help. How does the district leader plan to measure that? How soon should the district expect results? What's the money behind it?
- Arthur Levine, the president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation (and former president of Teachers College, Columbia University), has written that the job of principals is to transform schools and not just manage them. Given that, what is the district doing to help school leaders develop the special skills the task requires? Or is the district taking a sink-or-swim approach?
- Skills alone aren't enough, however. As Richard Laine says, districts and states can do a lot to create the conditions enabling principals to use their skills. So, what are they doing?
- When profiling a school or a principal, ask what the principal's vision is for the school: What are the goals, short- and long-term? What's the strategy for making the vision a reality? What obstacles does the effort face? (Ask teachers at the school the same questions. Are their answers the same?)
- Michael Usdan of the Institute for Educational Leadership suggests asking school district leaders whether the city is being supportive. He also suggests asking about the external political environment: How do the ethnic politics in a community affect the plans of the superintendent or school board? Do they influence the selection of a principal or a new superintendent? How do the leaders of organized labor outside the district view the teachers union?

of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. “This is especially true of the issue of school leadership. When we write about education reforms such as the small schools movement or the charter school explosion, we need to ask whether the system has the leadership capacity to make those initiatives

work. How can a district that already has a shortage of capable principals respond to the need for even more skilled leadership?”

WHAT IS GOOD LEADERSHIP?

But what is good educational leadership and what do journalists need to know about it?

Journalists can readily identify “the great leader who beat the system, getting tremendous results for kids that exceeded expectations,” said Richard Laine, who heads up The Wallace Foundation’s education philanthropy, at a Hechinger Institute seminar on educational leadership. “I would argue that in every case, when that leader moves on, the school falls back.” The reason, said Laraine M. Roberts, a researcher at WestEd in San Francisco, is that “the system puts a lot of energy into maintaining itself, and when something comes along to provoke it, in one way or another, it really has the ability to push back and



Richard Elmore
Harvard Graduate School
of Education
Leadership is “the
guidance and
direction of instructional
improvement.”

continue yielding the outcomes that it’s been yielding for years.” To quote Alan Bersin, who was the superintendent in San Diego for seven tumultuous years, “There is never a natural constituency for changing the status quo.”

Some superintendents spend a lot of energy keeping the peace and cause little controversy. Journalists sometimes mistake calm for progress. Other superintendents – Bersin was one; Arlene Ackerman, the former superintendent in San Francisco; and Roy Romer, the former Los Angeles superintendent

were others – make big changes and stir opposition. Journalists sometimes seize on the conflict as the story, instead of focusing on the vested interests that are threatened by reforms and on trying to independently evaluate the effect of the reforms leaders are attempting.

Education scholars talk about a number of different forms of leadership. Some, such as Michael Fullan, focus on how leaders go about getting “stuck” organizations to change (see p. 10). Others talk about transformative leadership, or what it takes to get good organizations to become great ones. Distributive leadership is another term that’s used. It refers to a leader who shares responsibility among more than one person – a principal and several teachers, for example – so that each can have a bigger impact in fewer areas. Another term journalists will hear is “instructional leadership.”

To Harvard education Professor Richard Elmore, this is the most important form of leadership. Education leadership is, quite simply, “the guidance and direction of instructional improvement” and everything that goes along with that, he has written. The idea that “principals should embody all the traits and skills that remedy all the defects of the schools in which they work” distracts them from their main work.⁴

Leithwood and a co-author have written that the core of most definitions of leadership involves three functions: setting a direction, developing people so that they can head in that direction, and redesigning the organization around instruction.⁵

“You hear a lot about leaders having a vision that is shared and compelling,” Leithwood told journalists at a Hechinger Institute seminar. Leaders also “have to help people figure out the shorter-term goals on the way to achieving that vision and then set high expectations for people in accomplishing those.”

KNOWING WHAT SCHOOLS NEED

District and school leaders have to motivate their teams and help them acquire the skills and knowledge they need. This might involve conducting staff meetings focused on improving a specific part of teaching, such as using informal assessments in the classroom. Or, it could mean reorganizing the school day and teachers’ responsibilities to give them the opportunity to learn through observing one another. It is now common for schools to employ instructional coaches to work with their peers. Principals who control their school’s budgets exercise instructional leadership by devoting resources to such purposes. Strong leaders mentor staff members, work to bolster their confidence, and enthusiastically embrace change. “It has to do with leaders’ sensitivity to ... the needs of the people they’re working with,” Leithwood said.

Leaders also have to work on “continually redesigning the organization so it actually helps people do these things rather than stands in their way,” he said. This means building a culture focused on results, protecting the school from outside interference and “having decent managerial practices in place so the organization is relatively stable and you can build on that stability.”

Finally, effective school and district leaders have to be willing to compete and, rather than complain about being held accountable for raising student achievement, embrace the challenge involved, Leithwood said.⁶ “It’s really hard to be a good leader if you’re closed-minded,” he said. “It’s also good to be optimistic and very persistent.”

Chris Kenning, an education writer at the *Courier-*



Journal in Louisville, has seen the difference leadership makes in changing instruction. “Success depends greatly on a principal’s ability to sell new approaches to staff and make sure they’re implemented in the classroom,” he said. He recalled the introduction to the Louisville schools of new reading, math, and discipline programs with the aim of raising test scores and improving the learning climate. “Ultimately, the programs failed because the principals never convinced teachers of the merits and did not follow through to make sure the programs were implemented. When principals quit or retired, new ones had even less of a stake in continuing the programs and often tried something different.” Although some principals blamed the programs themselves, district officials said it was a leadership problem, Kenning said.

THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

want my education team to identify the essential goals of the schools: promoting elementary literacy, closing the achievement gap, reconnecting every child in the school with at least one adult, and so on. I want them to assess the school’s attainment of those essential goals. And finally I want them to identify who is the leader responsible for leading the effort to achieve those goals. If a school district shines by making progress toward one of those essential goals, we as journalists should put the great leaders who made it happen in a spotlight. If the district fails to make its goals, we should shine a light on the leader who is in need of improvement.

DANA HAYNES, FORMERLY OF THE (SALEM, ORE.) STATESMAN JOURNAL



LIMITS ON LEADERSHIP

Still, there are limits on the power of superintendents and principals to act independently. Business journalists pay far more attention to leadership strategies and theories used by successful business executives than do education journalists. Many a profile has been written about the CEO who delivers high profits or turns a failing company into a blockbuster. For many years, former General Electric Chairman Jack Welch was the darling of the business press and his books on leadership were best-sellers.

It is common to hear that principals and superintendents need to operate more like business leaders. But education journalists should keep in mind that educational leaders operate under limitations that Jack Welch and other legendary corporate titans do not. CEOs usually can rely on the support of their boards of directors. (Reports of scandals involving major companies such as Worldcom,

HealthSouth, Enron and others show that some corporate boards are too supportive.) Superintendents, however, often have to cope with micromanaging school boards that are unwilling to support serious change. They have to contend with shifting political winds, powerful unions, and stubborn special interest groups. Education leaders do not control their revenue, nor can they choose to serve only easy-to-teach students. Union contracts, and spending constraints, mean that they cannot reward their best performers with big raises; nor is it easy to get rid of laggards.

Principals also face all of those limitations as well as having to satisfy the multiple demands on their time for reports and paperwork and surmount the obstacles thrown up by central office leaders unwilling to give them the authority they need to be effective. In addition, despite admonitions that they must be instructional leaders, principals still have to make sure the buses run on time, supplies are delivered, the school grounds are safe and, most of all, that parents’ questions and complaints are addressed.

Public Agenda, an opinion research organization, conducted focus groups with principals and superintendents in high-need school districts, and the findings provide clues about how strong leaders respond to those challenges. Leaders can be classified as “copers” or “transformers.” The transformers had an explicit vision for their school and did not get bogged down in the obstacles. The copers, on the other hand, became overwhelmed. Both types of leaders talked about the importance of instructional leadership. But the transformers actually did it, while copers merely talked about it. “The transformers knew teachers, knew kids, knew what they needed, and were on top of it,” Jean Johnson of Public Agenda said. “Copers,” she said, “never got to it. You’d hear the phrase, ‘I was headed to the classroom, and then something happened.’”⁷ The Public Agenda analysis also helps guide journalists about questions they can ask to get a sense of which category best fits the leaders they cover.

CREATING THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

The Wallace Foundation’s Richard Laine emphasizes that good leadership is not just a matter of hiring “heroic” principals and superintendents: States, school boards, and superintendents can create conditions that make it more

likely that more-ordinary leaders will be successful. This means:

- Providing principals and superintendents with access to useful data.
- Creating accountability systems that set meaningful targets for performance.
- Hiring people and evaluating them based on student performance.
- Giving principals sufficient authority to make necessary changes.
- Creating incentives to challenge the status quo (rather than making no waves).
- Allocating resources according to students' needs.
- Negotiating union contracts that do not tie the hands of superintendents and principals.⁸

Foundations have done much to raise the profile and importance of having high-quality education leadership. The



Kati Haycock
Education Trust
Leaders “make the most devastating choice of all, the choice of who teaches whom.”

Wallace Foundation, the underwriter of this Hechinger Institute publication, has invested about \$215 million since 2000 on research, policy analyses, experiments, training and convenings related to educational leadership, with promising results. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation also has invested in developing effective, forward-thinking superintendents, supporting more effective management practices, and increasing the relevance of principal training. A number of programs provide intensive training and on-the-job

mentoring for principals. Some, such as the New York City-based New Leaders for New Schools, are nonprofits. But others are operating in conjunction with universities, as in San Diego, or school districts, as in Boston, Chicago, Springfield (Mass.), Eugene (Ore.), Atlanta, Louisville, and elsewhere. States, including Iowa, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana, have shut down low-quality training programs for educational leaders. Many other efforts also are under way and worthy of journalists' attention.

But the United States remains far away from having a system for identifying high-potential principals and providing them with the training, mentoring, support, feedback, resources, and authority they need to help students succeed. No state, Darling-Hammond said, has a system that ensures that all principals know how to support high-quality instruction. Nor are superintendents always well

prepared for their many roles, which encompass instructional, managerial, and political responsibilities.⁹

The comings and goings of superintendents are big community news. The school district is often the largest employer, and its reputation affects real estate values, the local job market and, not incidentally, the futures of most of a community's children. So what superintendents say and do garners headlines, whatever the subject. But journalists should always ask themselves whether they – and their audience – know what the superintendent sees as the most pressing educational challenges. They should also



New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein at a press conference with Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Klein presides over the largest school district in the United States at a time when mayors are asserting themselves in the leadership and governance of school districts.

ask themselves the same question about what the superintendent is doing to respond to those challenges.

The work of principals also is important for journalists to cover. The leadership provided by a principal will not bring television crews to campuses as readily as will school violence. But much is at stake and the quality of school leadership will be critical to the outcome.

FEELING THE PRESSURE

For most of the history of public education, the doors to the future that schools opened for their students differed



according to their race, gender, family education and wealth. Today, schools are under enormous pressure to educate all children to a high level, regardless of their background. Leaders feel that pressure. “I’m most worried about leaders understanding the crucial point we’re at,” said Patricia Harvey, who during six years as superintendent of schools in St. Paul, Minn., gave campuses greater freedom while demanding across-the-board gains in student achievement. “If we fail our kids, we’re going to fail our nation. The challenges of leadership now are greater than ever before.”

To meet those challenges, she said, “We have to rethink just about every part of the educational system.”

Phillip C. Schlechty, who runs an education leadership training center and is the author of “Schools for the

“If we fail our kids, we’re going to fail our nation. The challenges of leadership now are greater than ever before.”

Patricia Harvey
National Center for
Education and the Economy
(former superintendent,
St. Paul, Minn., schools)

21st Century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform” and other books, agrees. “Schools must do things they’ve never before done and that they weren’t designed to do,” he told journalists at a Hechinger Institute seminar. “Innovation requires change. Teachers have to see themselves differently and principals have to act differently. Not just to be better at what they’ve always done, but do things they’ve never done. ... Changes take time.

Changes require leadership. If we’re going to get the kind of improvement we need, we have to be prepared to change the system to create new systems, new rules, new roles and new relationships.”

And, it should be said, journalists need to recognize the quality of leadership required to carry out such changes. If they do, they’ll also see a rich array of stories that will help their readers, listeners, and viewers better understand the schools in their communities. **H**

¹ Kati Haycock, “Closing the Achievement Gap: Where Are We? What Are the Most Important Roles for Education Leaders?” in *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform* (The Wallace Foundation, fall 2007).

² Linda Darling-Hammond, *Excellent Teachers Deserve Excellent Leaders* (The Wallace Foundation, fall 2007).

³ Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Learning* (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2004).

⁴ Richard F. Elmore, *Building a New Structure for School Leadership* (The Albert Shanker Institute, 2000).

⁵ Kenneth Leithwood and Carolyn J. Riehl, *What We Know About Successful School Leadership* (Philadelphia: Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University, 2003).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Remarks of Jean Johnson on *A Mission of the Heart: What Does it Take to Transform Schools*, preliminary report (The Wallace Foundation, October 2007).

⁸ Remarks made at a Hechinger Institute seminar, 2006.

⁹ Susan Moore Johnson, *Leading to Change: The Challenge of the New Superintendency* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

★ Leadership Coverage ★

FROM “OREGON’S SMALL-SCHOOL EXPERIMENT SLOW TO SEE RESULTS,” BY BETSY HAMMOND AND LISA GRACE LEDNICER, THE (PORTLAND) OREGONIAN. JUNE 8, 2008

“The group leading Oregon’s small-school charge is a business-backed nonprofit known as E3, or Employers for Education Excellence. Organizers remain bullish on the approach but concede it may take years to see results worth bragging about.

“The results are slower than anyone wanted,” says Karen Phillips, a former school administrator who heads E3’s small-schools initiative. She pledges that by 2010, graduation rates will rise and schools will deliver double-digit increases in the passing rates on 10th-grade reading, writing and math exams.

She sees promising signs...But it’s clear that some of the central tenets of E3’s strategy have hampered better outcomes for all students.

Organizers put so much emphasis on school structure and small details of the reorganization that the caliber of teaching became secondary.

At Liberty [High School], for example, Principal Gregg O’Mara says...the school reorganized twice in the past four years. Starting this fall, he says, Liberty will focus on getting every teacher to collaborate with colleagues on better teaching and student outcomes.

Leadership also has been a problem. Top-notch schools typically require top-notch principals. But school districts cannot afford to pay multiple principals at one high school the same high salary as they pay the principal of a big high school.

As a result, many small high schools are run by lower-paid, less-experienced administrators. That has led to high turnover, and at some schools, confusion among teachers and students about who is in charge.

In addition, E3 has not been clear about the results it wants from small schools. There are no performance targets or timelines for schools, and the group has not defined what makes a student “college ready.”

E3 leaders admit they were naive about how easy change would be. They learned the hard way that they can’t overhaul schools without more backing from superintendents and district administrators. They also are providing more teacher training, particularly in reading and math. ”



The Very Model of a Modern Superintendent

District leaders used to be managers; now we seek reformers who can navigate local politics.

The job of the modern school superintendent is dramatically different from that of the nation's first public school superintendent – a Buffalo, N.Y., pioneer named Oliver G. Steele, appointed in 1837. Early era superintendents tended to be part-time “educational evangelists” hired to assist school boards in carrying out their work.¹ By the



Alan Bersin (former) superintendent, San Diego City Schools. Leaders must foster a culture in which educators believe students “really can learn challenging material and important ideas.”

turn of the 20th century, most superintendents were career professionals who “were expected to be efficient managers by the successful businessmen of the school board who hired them.”² Over time, superintendents also were expected to become skilled in public relations and be able to maneuver in the often treacherous shoals of politics – on the school board, among ethnic groups, around the negotiating table with unions, and in the state house. In addition, superintendents were cheerleaders for public education, defending it from critics and arguing for more money.

The standards and accountability movements in U.S. education have pushed academic achievement to the fore. Superintendents are twice removed from the classroom. They do, however, set the district agenda, decide on curriculum, think about equitable distribution of resources,

oversee district-wide training programs, and evaluate principals – hopefully all in concert with the school board. A 2006 study of the American superintendency found that almost two-thirds of the leaders of large school districts and more than 40 percent of all superintendents thought their primary job was to be an educational leader.³

But superintendents also think school boards are wary of them moving too fast. A 2000 survey of superintendents found that nearly a third of them thought they were hired to be “change agents.” In 2006, fewer than 10 percent said that. The plunge was even sharper among the leaders of large districts: from 29 percent in 2000 to only 4 percent in 2006. “Boards today may be more interested in an effective superintendent ‘developing’ a district through effective leadership practices,” the latest survey found. Most boards, it seems, “are not looking for hired guns to come in and ‘make over’ the district.”⁴ On the other hand, only 2 percent of superintendents said their school board wanted them to maintain the status quo.⁵

WEARING MANY HATS

Clearly, superintendents have to do many jobs at once. “As instructional leaders, they bear ultimate responsibility for improving student achievement,” writes Larry Lashway, citing the work of Stanford University professor Larry Cuban. “As managerial leaders, they have to keep their districts operating efficiently, with a minimum of friction, yet taking risks to make necessary changes. As political leaders, they have to negotiate with multiple stakeholders to get approval for programs and resources.”⁶

They have to fulfill those responsibilities while exposed to the often hot glare of media scrutiny.

In 2001, journalist Matthew Miller wrote a brilliant and provocative profile for the *Washington Monthly* that ticked off the challenges facing former Colorado Gov. Roy Romer when he became superintendent of schools in Los Angeles in 2000. “An aggressive corporate community; a vigilant press; meddling board members; entrenched unions; and neighborhoods fractured by race, language, reli-

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s reporters, we not only have the ability to document history as it is unfolding, but we have the ability (and responsibility) to remind our readers of the past. When our communities bring in

“change agents” to reform or alter the culture of our schools, we have a responsibility to restate that reality once the inevitable time comes when people in the system complain that such leadership is “top down.” It’s important for us to get on the record, early on, what is expected of our school leaders when they are hired. This way, we can not only hold leaders accountable for their work, we can also hold the public accountable for the way it evaluates that leadership.

JOE WILLIAMS, FORMER EDUCATION WRITER, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, AND AUTHOR OF “CHEATING OUR CHILDREN”





Judith Johnson
 Superintendent of the Year, New York, 2008
 Leaders make enemies whenever they are “instituting a new policy, abandoning one or firing people.”

gion and income, all fighting for scarce resources over the one thing people care about most: kids. Add to this combustible mix the fact that urban school districts, unlike private corporations, reflect democracy at its most extreme. Everybody has a right to a say, and everybody exercises that right.”⁷

Frederick M. Hess, who heads up the educational policy wing of the American Enterprise Institute, told Miller that all of the limitations make being an urban superintendent “a miserable leadership position, and it doesn’t matter that

it’s the school system – if you put the same kind of restrictions on Larry Ellison or Bill Gates or Michael Dell, you wouldn’t expect them to be successful.”⁸

What all of this means is that the job of the modern superintendent – and to a lesser degree the principal – is intensely and unrelentingly political. That’s inevitable given that a school district imposes taxes, often has the biggest local public budget, and is a significant purchaser of goods and services. And that can be paralyzing, says Bobbie D’Alessandro, the former superintendent of schools in Cambridge, Mass. “Sometimes you get so mired in politics that you even forget what you started out to do,” said D’Alessandro, who fought with many parents and the school board over trying to reform a high school by breaking it up into small learning communities. “Superintendents constantly have to choose between initiatives that might work, but might get you fired, or initiatives that many have some effect, but only moderately so.”

‘YOU’RE GOING TO MAKE ENEMIES’

Judith Johnson, the superintendent of schools in Peekskill, N.Y., and New York’s Superintendent of the Year for 2008, said journalists need to recognize that choppy political waters don’t necessarily mean that a district leader has made mistakes. “You’re going to make enemies,” she said, “any time you’re instituting a new policy, abandoning one or firing people.” Budget decisions also rouse opposition.

Retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. John C. Fryer Jr. once commanded an F-16 tactical fighter wing and later served as superintendent of schools in Duval County, Fla., the nation’s 16th largest school district. He then became president and CEO of the National Institute for School Leadership, an organization that trains principals nationally. Leaders have to work with outside entities to increase what he called the “leadership space,” he says. By that he means gaining the latitude to take action as needed. But there are no hard and fast solutions to the problems of education, he said – only tradeoffs.

“I see a lot of educators who just want money, money, money,” he said. “The key to success is making the right tradeoffs given the resources you have. And how the superintendent makes those tradeoffs is what leadership is.”

In most news organizations, covering education means a reporter spends at least part of the time covering the superintendent and his or her interactions with the school board. That often means that the relationship between the superintendent and the school board – especially when it is tense – becomes an ongoing story for the media. It is important, however, to not see conflict where none exists. About four in five superintendents nationally say they have a good relationship with their school board and about the same say their school board

Profile: School Superintendents

Gender

Male	Female
78.3%	21.7%

Race / ethnicity

White	Black, non-Hispanic	Hispanic	All others
93.9%	2.0%	1.4%	2.7%

Doctoral degrees held

None	Ed. administration/ leadership	Curriculum and instruction	Other
49.3%	43.7%	3.2%	3.8%

Last position before becoming a superintendent

Principal	Assistant superintendent	Associate/deputy superintendent	Director
46.7%	29.0%	8.1%	6.7%

Average length of tenure in current position

1982	1992	2006
5.6 years	6.4 years	5.5 years

Most important reason for being hired

Leadership ability	Personal characteristics	Management skills	Experience as a change agent
49.2%	21.7%	14.0%	9.4%

Hours per week spent in direct communication with board members

0 to 1	2 to 3	4 to 5	6 or more
13.1%	36.2%	25.4%	25.5%

Factors that inhibit superintendents’ effectiveness

Inadequate financing	Too many insignificant demands	State reform mandates	Board of education
29.0%	19.0%	16.2%	12.7%

Some categories add up to more than 100% because of rounding. When categories add up to less than 100%, only the top responses were used.

Source: Thomas E. Glass and Louis A. Franceschini, in partnership with American Association of School Administrators, *The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2007).



is doing a good or very good job of overseeing the district. Still, nearly a third of urban superintendents say their school board is doing a poor or very poor job.⁹

The problem with overemphasizing the school board-superintendent relationship is that it can crowd out thoughtful coverage of how superintendents are fulfilling their responsibilities as educational leaders. The most effective superintendents, according to Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, do not let each school do their own thing, although that may be what teachers think they want. Effective superintendents adopt a districtwide approach to instruction. Writing in the *The*

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

I've gained a new respect for the complexity of the jobs of principals and superintendents. At the same time, I've discovered questions to ask and what to look for to see leadership in action. I now know that in order to convey the many facets of the executive role to my readers, I need to understand a leader's aims. Instead of judging leaders on the basis

on my past knowledge and perceptions, I need to spend quality time observing them. My future stories will challenge educators to prove their leadership abilities. I will encourage them to express their concerns and points of pride.

**TERESA MASK,
DETROIT FREE PRESS**



School Administrator, the magazine for superintendents, Tim Waters and Bob Marzano of MCREL assert that in effective districts, principals are trained to closely monitor implementation of the district's instructional program. Principals conduct regular "walk throughs" of classrooms to monitor the "quality, fidelity, consistency, and intensity" of the teaching.

An effective superintendent will ensure that the district's professional development programs are customized to support the instructional program. And while principals are encouraged to be strong leaders, they are all expected to support the district's approach.

CONFLICT IN SAN DIEGO

Alan Bersin, the superintendent of schools in San Diego from 1998 to 2005, fully embraced this concept of leadership. But the teachers union in the district and two members of the school board accused him of exercising "top down" leadership and failing to get "buy

in" from the teachers. In reality, the teachers union resisted attempts by Bersin to improve teaching, arguing that they violated agreements that such decisions would be made at schools by teacher-dominated committees.

The teachers union referred constantly to Bersin's "top down" approach to instruction and the media in San Diego cited that criticism in virtually every story. The characterization continued to be applied even three years after Bersin had left the district. Journalists often fall into this trap, but rarely do they ask themselves how attacking every reform a superintendent undertakes benefits the attackers. Teachers in San Diego marched more than

once in San Diego to protest Bersin's leadership, carrying signs calling him a Nazi and comparing him to Hitler. (Bersin is Jewish.) But media stories always portrayed the situation as two sides fighting and not able to get along, rather than explaining what was being attempted, the basis for it in research, and why some teachers and their union were opposed

The truth is, of course, that the mission of improving education cannot be accomplished by reorganizing the central office, issuing directives, or spending more money on

professional development of principals and teachers. It requires a wholesale change in culture, from the classroom to the superintendent's office and the school board. What Harvard education professor Richard Elmore calls the "educational core" and the University of Michigan's Deborah Ball and her colleagues call the "instructional core" – by

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

he leadership skills of superintendents can be the deciding factor in many of the issues they confront: Can they get enough operational and capital funding?

**T. KEUNG HUI, (RALEIGH, N.C.)
NEWS & OBSERVER**

Can they persuade the community to back new education initiatives? A journalist who doesn't recognize this will do readers and viewers a tremendous disservice.



which both mean the interaction of a teacher and his or her students around academic content – has been left virtually untouched by school reforms.¹⁰

One reason for that is a lack of leadership. Developing



that new culture requires getting teachers and everyone else to believe that students “really can learn challenging material and important ideas,” Bersin said. “It’s one thing to talk about it, and it’s something else to see in your own classroom that, if you teach it well, they will learn it.”¹¹

But before teaching can improve, teachers and their principals have to learn new techniques and gain new insights into how children learn. That, Bersin said, “would require adult learning, and they had to be willing to get engaged in that learning.” Finally, he said, educators have to accept accountability for results.

If educators don’t adopt a new set of values and behaviors as their own and see them as the new norm for both themselves and their peers, then whatever progress is made will be minimal and evanescent, disappearing with the arrival of a new superintendent or school board and the imposition of a new action plan. A well-known expert on change in education, Michael Fullan, uses the term “reculturing” and says, “Effective leaders know that the hard work of reculturing is the *sine qua non* of progress.”¹² In addition, Fullan says, leaders must not only change the culture, they must develop a “culture of change” so that the organization has the “capacity to seek, critically assess, and selectively incorporate new ideas and practices.”

Superintendents often wish that journalists would try to learn more about the complexities of the job – and the limitations on superintendents – rather than always looking for controversies.

Doris Kurtz, the superintendent in Bridgeport, Conn., said the media report issues, events and policies in isolation and do not reflect how such challenges can accumulate and overwhelm educators. “Legislators want to pass a law requiring 30 minutes of recess but they don’t look deeper and see how doing that would affect so many other aspects of the school,” she said.

George Russell, the highly regarded superintendent of Eugene, Ore., agreed. He said superintendents make a difference in two ways: getting resources to the schools in a way that directs the most to schools that need them the most, and choosing the right principals. Often in schools, Russell said, groups are pitted against one another and each perceives that any increase in resources for one group or area of the district represents a loss to another one. “It’s the losses that bring about controversy,” he said.

FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION

Johnson, the Peekskill superintendent, said her work is dominated by concerns about how to improve instruction.

What to Look for in a Successful Leader of Change

What reporters cover is change; if everything stays the same, there isn’t much of a story. But changing a complex organization like a school district is fraught with difficulties. Many reporters have chronicled the demise of a leader who tried to change too fast or one who failed to make any changes at all. Michael Fullan is regarded as one of the top change theorists in education. These insights from his book, “Leading in a Culture of Change,” give journalists some characteristics to look for in the leaders they cover:¹

“Change is a double-edged sword. Its relentless pace these days runs us off our feet. Yet when things are unsettled, we can find new way to move ahead and to create breakthroughs not possible in stagnant societies. If you ask people to brainstorm words to describe change, they come up with a mixture of negative and positive terms. On the one side, fear, anxiety, loss, danger, panic; on the other, exhilaration, risk-taking, excitement, improvements, energizing. For better or for worse, change arouses emotions, and when emotions intensify, leadership is key. ... Charismatic leaders inadvertently often do more harm than good because, at best, they provide episodic improvement followed by frustrated or despondent dependency. Superhuman leaders also do us another disservice: They are role models who can never be emulated by large numbers. Deep and sustained reform depends on many of us, not just on the very few who are destined to be extraordinary.”

Fullan then identifies five characteristics of successful leaders of change in schools, business, or other organizations where there is a consensus:

- Projecting a sense of moral purpose. “Acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole.”
- Understanding of the change process. “Moral purpose without an understanding of change will lead to moral martyrdom.” This is elusive, he acknowledges. “Management books contain reams of advice, but the advice is often contradictory, general, and at the end of the day, confusing and nonactionable.”
- Improving relationships. “If relationships improve, things get better. ... Leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups – especially with people different from themselves.”
- Building knowledge. “Leaders constantly commit themselves to generating and increasing knowledge inside and outside the organization.” Knowledge must be shared if it is to be productive. “Turning information into knowledge is a social process, and for that you need good relationships.”
- Building coherence. “Effective leaders tolerate enough ambiguity to keep the creative juices flowing, but along the way (once they and the group know enough), they seek coherence.”

¹ Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) 1-7.



Not long ago, she said, she spent a long time talking with a reporter about all that the district was doing to reduce its dropout rate. The journalist then reported on a gang fight and never came back to the district's dropout prevention program. "I'm not saying do one story or the other; I'm saying do both," she said.

Michael Casserly, who has long headed up the Council of Great City Schools, said that journalists and the community place "undue weight on the superintendent and his or her ability to turn the system around by his or herself."

The council has been asked by a number of districts to analyze their situation. "We're looking more at the ability of the entire school system's leadership to define a theory of action, grounded in good research on students, and be able to sustain that agenda for a long period of time," he said.

The superintendent, however, is key to making sure that is happening. "They need to have a firm handle on how they're trying to improve academics systemwide and pay special attention to the schools that are furthest behind.

"A fair number of times, we've found that superintendents are surprisingly disengaged from their instructional programs, which discourages me," he said. "It means they've delegated their bottom line to their middle management, and I'm convinced the superintendent really needs to be on top of that to move forward."

That focus on instruction – taking a hard look at whether the superintendent really is engaged in improving the bottom line for all students – is a good perspective for journalists to adopt as well. ■

¹ Richard F. Elmore, *Building a New Structure for School Leadership* (The Albert Shanker Institute, 2000).

² Ellen L. Wolf, "The School Superintendent in the Reform Era: Perceptions of Practitioners, Principals and Pundits," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 65-4 (summer 1998).

³ Thomas E. Glass, Louis A. Franceschini, *The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study* (American Association of School Administrators, 2007).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Larry Lashway, "The Superintendent in an Age of Accountability," ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 2002. Accessed on Dec. 31, 2007, at <http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-3/age.htm>

⁷ Matthew Miller, "The Super," *Washington Monthly*, June 2001.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Glass, Franceschini.

¹⁰ Richard F. Elmore, "Teaching, Learning and School Organization," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 31 (1995): 355-374.

¹¹ Richard Lee Colvin interview with Alan Bersin, San Diego, February 2008.

¹² Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 44.

★ Leadership Coverage ★

FROM "RHEE DEPLOYS AN 'ARMY OF BELIEVERS'"
BY BILL TURQUE, WASHINGTON POST, JULY 5, 2008

“ Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee...has just finished filling 45 vacancies in her principal corps, the first full cohort of school leaders she has assembled since her arrival in June 2007.

Each one represents a huge bet for Rhee. The link between student achievement and the quality of principals is beyond dispute. The right leader can forge dramatic changes in the level of teaching and the overall climate of a school.

The new hires reflect the evolving nature of the urban principal's task, including the traditional needs of children from low-income families or troubled neighborhoods and the new, high-stakes demands of such laws as No Child Left Behind, which require continuous improvement in test scores.

The skill set looks more like that of a high-energy chief executive who develops teachers, builds coalitions with parents and community leaders, and engages nonprofit groups and other outside players to bolster instruction.

Rhee is trying to shape a generation of principals who share the heart of her approach, which means sifting test results to identify student deficits (the "data-driven culture") and tailoring teaching to meet children's specific needs ("differentiated instruction").

And, like Rhee, they are devoted to the proposition that poor children in bad schools deserve a full and fair chance to learn.

"Every child in the building, I want to know what their weaknesses are," said Dwan Jordon, 35, an assistant principal in Prince George's County who turned down a promotion there to take over one of the District's weakest schools, Sousa Middle School in Southeast Washington.

"An army of believers," said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, former Cleveland school superintendent, describing what Rhee is attempting to build...Rhee's task, she said, is "getting the best candidates who understand the depth of the work and are willing to get dirty and be held accountable for student achievement." ”

New Expectations Place Tough Demands on Principals

Today's leaders must guide instruction, manage campuses and deal with parents and community.

Kathleen Mayer is a soft-spoken but firm ex-Peace Corps member. For 16 years, she guided Rachel Carson Elementary School in Chicago's largely Hispanic, low-income Gage Park neighborhood on the city's South Side. During her tenure, Rachel Carson's test scores soared, its bilingual program was hailed as a model, teachers rarely moved on, and Mayer herself frequently hosted visiting dignitaries, researchers, and journalists in search of her secret. Aspiring principals did internships and residencies there, hoping the magic would rub off.

But in June 2007, Mayer left the 1,300-student school – and the principalship – behind. Despite the success that took her to conferences across the nation to talk about her leadership, she decided that the job of the modern school principal was all but undoable. “Nobody can be God, and I think that is what we are asking of principals,” Mayer said. She believes the many responsibilities of the job should be split between co-principals.

“There are so many people who want a piece of you,” Mayer said. “Teachers will be surveyed and say, ‘The

principal should be in the classroom.’ Parents will say, ‘The principal needs to be at more of our activities.’ Central office will say, ‘The principal needs to be helping the whole system.’ ”

To be sure, many principals find that the job's satisfactions outweigh the stress that comes with it. They get to see students develop over time. They see programs mature. They see individual teachers blossom. They see collaborations unfold and a team accomplish more than individuals could on their own.

But if you ask principals what they most want journalists to know about their jobs, invariably they'll talk about the multiple demands on their time. Michael F. DiPaola, a professor at the College of William and Mary, said principals used to be mainly building managers and disciplinarians. Today, principals are expected to be instructional leaders up-to-date with current

research findings, change agents who lead steady improvement, accountability officers, morale boosters, school safety chiefs, and liaisons with the community. Meanwhile, the traditional management role hasn't gone away but instead

has become more demanding, as districts add programs to boost achievement, states request more reports, pressure builds to connect teacher evaluations to performance and compensation, and e-mail and cell phones call out for immediate, round-the-clock responses. DiPaola and a colleague surveyed Virginia principals and assistant principals and learned that their biggest concern was trying to improve instruction. The principals themselves said they needed more training, more authority, and more skilled teachers to handle that job. DiPaola, who spoke at a Hechinger Institute seminar for journalists, said the survey results “reveal a profession under stress.”¹

Former New York City public school Principal Daria Rigner once listed teacher,



Michael F. DiPaola
College of William & Mary
School of Education
A survey of principals reveals “a profession under stress.”



Lauren B. Resnick
University of Pittsburgh
Learning Research and
Development Center
Principals “are the teachers of their teachers.”

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

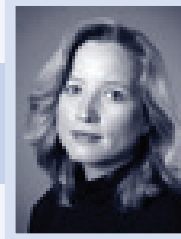
he press does a lot of reporting on the lists of poorly performing schools that are issued periodically, but journalists don't often follow up on how the schools and districts respond to being named to such a list. It would be worthwhile to ask: What do the school leaders do in response? How do they organize their efforts, step by step? What did the principal do on the day or week after the report was released? How did he or she engage the teachers in analyzing the situation and preparing an action plan? What leadership emerged among the teachers? At a higher level, how did or didn't the superintendent and his or her team mobilize? Taking a look at these lists of poorly performing schools through the prism of leadership would be a more constructive approach for journalists to covering the No Child Left Behind Act than merely focusing on publishing test scores and lists.

**GREG STONE, FORMERLY OF
THE (NEW LONDON, CONN.) DAY**

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

ood leadership in schools manifests itself in many ways, and good educational coverage needs to reflect that. This involves going beyond one of the most popular measures we employ – standardized test scores – to give a complete picture of what is happening. Understanding a school culture through discussions with employees and parents can be crucial to getting at one aspect of leadership. Observations of leaders and students add another dimension. Context is everything. History and knowledge of what has previously happened helps complete the story.

AMY HETZNER,
MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL



nar that principals might have 50 to 60 interactions with people per hour. Those interactions are marked by brevity, variety, fragmentation, ambiguity (meaning that the outlines of the problem to be solved let alone its solution may not be clear), and uncertainty. Sustaining a school improvement strategy or carving out enough time to focus on a specific problem – such as how to increase the rigor of student writing assignments or address the academic needs of older students not fluent in English – can seem impossible. But failure to do so may affect a principal’s

coach, mediator, building manager, budget director, guidance counselor, grant writer, custodian, data entry clerk and mother figure as among the roles she played on a daily basis at her struggling Chinatown elementary school. Dick Flanary, who heads up professional development services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said the public’s understanding of the role of the principal has not kept up with reality. “The public has an expectation that they will go to the principal regardless of the issue at hand,” he said, and such interactions can dominate the principal’s workday.

In 2003, about 75 percent of 925 principals surveyed by Public Agenda for The Wallace Foundation said daily emergencies rob them of time better spent in the classroom working with teachers; 88 percent said they’d experienced “an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources to fulfill them.”

Kent D. Peterson, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, said at a Hechinger Institute semi-

paycheck or lead to the loss of the position altogether. Harvard Education Professor Richard Elmore is quoted elsewhere in this publication (see p.3) saying that the critical role of the principal as the school’s instructional leader must overshadow all other responsibilities. That is not a new insight but the reality is that, beyond rhetoric, school districts rarely do much to elevate instructional responsibilities over all others. Researchers in Jefferson County, Ky., followed several principals through their day, keeping close tabs on their use of time. What did they find? Principals spent, on average, less than a third of their time on instruction. The rest was devoted to the myriad tasks involved in running a school. That finding led the district to create a new position at some of its schools, called a “school administration manager,” to handle non-learning jobs. Being able to delegate tasks allows principals to teach sample lessons, coach teachers on making their lessons more intellectually engaging, or analyze the rigor of assignments. In schools that experimented with having a SAM, as the

Profile: Public School Principals

Race / ethnicity			
White	Black, non-Hispanic	Hispanic	All others
82.4%	10.6%	5.3%	1.7%
Highest Degree Attained			
Bachelor’s Degree	Master’s Degree	Ed. Specialist or prof. diploma	Ed.D. or Ph.D.
1.7%	59.2%	30.3%	8.6%
Previous School Positions			
Asst. principal/program director	Sponsor for student clubs/ debate teams	Department head	Athletic coach/athletic director
68.0%	52.7%	35.6%	33.9%
Experience			
Avg. years as principal in any school		Avg. years as principal in current school	
7.8		4.3	
Average annual salary, by years of experience			
Fewer than 3 years	3-9 years	10 years or more	
\$71,100	\$75,800	\$78,700	
Average hours spent per week on ...			
All school-related activities		Interacting with students	
59.0		22.8	
Teaching			
Principals who also teach		Avg. years teaching before becoming principal	
27.7%		13.0%	

*The education specialist degree or administrator professional diploma is a post-master’s degree that leads to an administrative certificate in most states.

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools Staffing Survey, 2003-04.

continued on page 16



To Improve Coverage, Go Beyond the Standard Fare

The comings and goings of school leaders are important. But journalists can add depth to their stories by making tough, independent assessments of superintendents and principals.

By Richard Lee Colvin

Five months after Thandiwe Peebles became superintendent in Minneapolis, reporter Steve Brandt wrote that she had created a sense of urgency and worked hard to put her stamp on the district. But, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* reporter wrote, she also had “been hard on people, berating some employees, sidelining others and leaving some teachers confused about how they’re supposed to improve their students’ performance.”

Teachers are “open to direction, but it’s not clear what the direction is, and poor communication does not help her reach those goals,” a former administrator said.¹

“As far as leadership, she’s really fallen short so far,” a former school board member said.

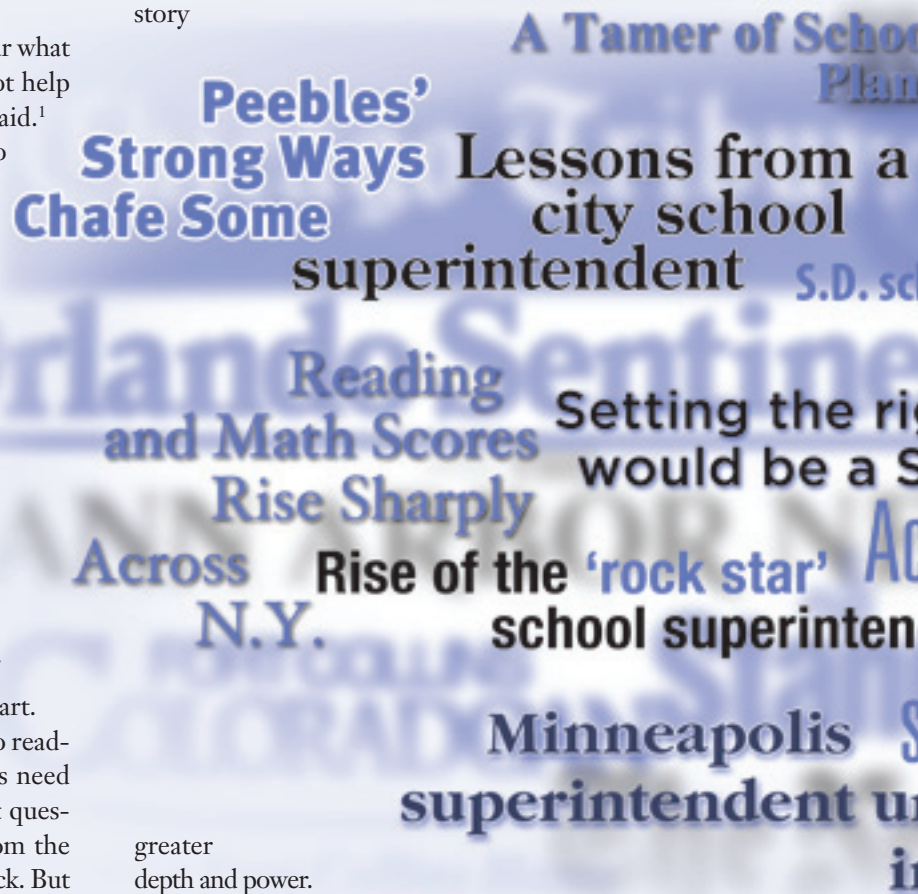
Brandt’s article was densely reported and scrupulously fair. He showed the great challenges Peebles faced and her commitment to meeting them. Supporters said shrinking the district’s enormous achievement gap required shaking up employees to defeat the inertia of the status quo. But when Peebles resigned 14 months later, the issues Brandt identified five months in were a big factor. An example of classic explanatory journalism, the article helped readers make sense of news between the article and her departure.

Reporting independently on the leadership of a superintendent is not for the lazy or faint of heart. Quoting supporters and detractors and leaving it to readers or listeners to decide is insufficient. Reporters need to know enough about leadership to ask the right questions. Brandt, who is white, took a lot of heat from the African-American supporters of Peebles, who is black. But the stories he did over the course of Peebles’ tenure reflect deep reporting that allowed him to authoritatively describe her strengths as well as her weaknesses and her efforts to improve student achievement.

The repertoire of journalists on the education beat includes some standard fare: the profile of a superintendent right after he has been hired. The feature on the new superintendent’s first day on the job. The unveiling of the Big Plan, the roadmap the new leader has decided to pursue after lots of “listening and learning.” The one-year anniversary. The resignation or dismissal. The valedictory.

The list of standard stories about principals is shorter: introducing a new principal, profiling the “turnaround” principal, or recognizing the accomplishments of a principal on the doorstep of retirement.

Those are legitimate stories. Reporting on how a leader is contributing to the educational bottom line of teaching and learning will give a story



greater depth and power.

As Harvard’s Richard Elmore says elsewhere in this primer: Leadership is the “guidance and direction of instructional improvement.”

Yet that often does not get mentioned in coverage. It’s as if it is assumed that good teaching is a given and not worthy of comment. A recent *New York Times* profile of a young, smart principal who headed up a school on the rise did not consider whether improved teaching might be part of the reason for the gains.

When William G. Andrekopoulos was hired as superintendent in Milwaukee in 2002, he inherited a portfolio of schools, each going in its own direction. He set about



establishing clear academic standards and performance expectations, supported and enforced districtwide.

Some reporters would focus solely on whether test scores were going up or down. But Sarah Carr, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* highly regarded former education writer, instead visited Boston in 2005 to report reform under Superintendent Thomas Payzant, who shared Andrekopoulos' philosophy. The story she produced was nuanced and surprisingly dramatic, and explored the tension between a central academic focus and support for teachers' creativity and inspiration. "It's a delicate act," she wrote, "to become more consistent without becoming rigid; to be hierarchical

making snap decisions, and escaping the stiffness of the orthodoxy."

The press in Springfield, Mass., a few years back missed a terrific story about leadership. Joseph Burke, the schools superintendent, spent 2 ½ years negotiating a labor contract that created new positions for teachers, enabling them to earn more than some principals if they were willing to help their colleagues improve. "The larger picture was that we ... wanted to reward teachers in a different way and we were going to redeploy the best teachers to the schools with the biggest needs," said Burke, who expended a lot of political capital to get the agreement. "Those kinds of issues were not part of the media coverage."

Coverage that only reports on the hostile reaction in some quarters to what a leader is trying to do can short-circuit potentially successful reforms that need time to take hold. The emphasis on conflict by journalists may contribute to that fact that urban superintendents tend to change as fast as baseball managers.

Journalists also can contribute to stability by reporting deeply on the challenges a district faces when it is about to hire a new leader. Does the district need someone to shake things up? Or to improve on what's there? Is there consensus about what needs to be done first? In June 2007, the *Washington Post* published a multipart investigative series titled "Fixing D.C.'s Schools." The series came soon after Mayor Adrian M. Fenty, who had campaigned on a promise to fix the district's chronically failing schools, was sworn in. When Michelle Rhee was hired by Fenty as chancellor, she knew what she faced. Since then, the *Post* has kept tabs on her leadership, holding her accountable for tackling the difficult problems.³

A year in, she was working hard on improving the district operationally but also had hired 45 new principals to work on the core mission of student achievement. The *Post* recognized the importance of that effort. Each principal, the paper reported, "represents a huge bet for Rhee. The link between student achievement and the quality of principals is beyond dispute. The right leader can forge dramatic changes in the level of teaching and the overall climate of a school."⁴ ■

ols Has
in New Orleans

New superintendent faces far different hurdles in Boston

chool board looks to

N.C. for leadership Poway Unified sued

ght goals for Grier over removal of

SMART move teacher's 'God' signs

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dent she'll quit as hits the

schools chief running

nder

investigation

without squashing grassroots fervor; to elevate the worst schools without stifling the best."²

Carr visited schools to see those tensions firsthand. A high school math coach showed her a thick book that dictated the daily lessons to be used across Boston. A student at another school marveled over the introduction of Advanced Placement English. At another school, though, an unorthodox principal emphasized "bending the rules,

1 Steve Brandt, "Peebles' Strong Ways Chafe Some," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Jan. 5, 2005.

2 Sarah Carr, "Learning a Lesson of Consistency," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Jan. 8, 2005.

3 Dan Keating, V. Dion Hayes, et al. "Fixing D.C.'s Schools: Can D.C.'s Schools be Fixed?" *Washington Post*, June 10, 2007.

4 Bill Turque, "Rhee Deploys 'Army of Believers,'" *Washington Post*, July 5, 2008.

Questions to Ask About the Leadership of Principals

Here are some tips for reporting on the work of principals:

- Douglas Wood, the executive director of the National Academy for Excellent Teaching at Teachers College, said that before reporters visit a school, they should know its achievement data, as well as the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic breakdown.
- Wood also suggests asking the principal to discuss his or her short-term and long-term vision for how to maintain or increase student achievement. Do the teachers know what the vision is and share it? Do they take an active part in making it a reality?
- How much time does the principal spend in classrooms? Does the principal talk about instruction? About good practices? About research? Visit a classroom with him or her and then debrief. Can the principal tell you what he or she saw instructionally in the classroom?
- Are teachers encouraged to help one another? Are they given time to observe each other's classes?
- Are teachers knowledgeable about the state achievement standards?
- How does the principal monitor the performance of teachers and students? How does the principal provide feedback to the teachers?
- What is the conversation in the teachers' lunch room like? What is the atmosphere in staff meetings? In training sessions?
- What data does the principal consult regularly in making decisions or in talking with teachers?
- What is the school district doing to support principals? Offering training? Mentoring? Administrative help? Reducing demands for paperwork?
- Peter L. McFarlane, the principal of Hugo Newman College Preparatory School in Harlem, said journalists reporting on a school should ask how long the principal has been there. "What you look for in a first-year principal may be different than what you look for in a fifth-year principal or a 10th-year principal," he said.
- Phyllis Williams, a former New York City principal who now works with the administrators union, said reporters should be skeptical if the principal's desk is neat and uncluttered. Look for children's art and photographs of students. Be wary of principals who deny access to certain classrooms, wings or parts of the building, she said. "Are they micromanaging your visit and hiding things? Where is the principal? Are they walking the halls, interacting with kids and teachers or shut up in their office? Do they have an open-door policy, or must teachers always make an appointment to see them?"

continued from page 13

position is known, test scores rose. With that evidence in hand, The Wallace Foundation helped the innovation spread throughout Kentucky, and now 40 districts in eight states employ SAMs to give principals more time to focus on instruction. Kent Stock, a middle school principal in Marion, Iowa, said of the administrative help he gets: "I can't imagine life without this."²

Another change for principals is the enormous amount of data generated as part of the national push for accountability. Ericka Harris-Robinson, the principal of a high-performing elementary school serving low-income children in Benton Harbor, Mich., is an expert in using data to guide instructional improvement. But she feels overwhelmed at times with the thick reports she has to produce several times a year for her school district and the state, and in connection with the federal aid her school receives.

"It is excessive," she said of the reporting requirements. "It takes away from what you can do." She has stayed at the school working until 1 a.m. and even taken a sick day now and then to get away long enough to compile data for required reports.

Carolyn J. Riehl, a professor in the leadership program at Teachers College, Columbia University, said districts aren't just asking for year-end assessment results. Principals also are required to produce data on interim assessments administered as often as every six weeks.

But the best measure of a principal's effectiveness may not be test scores. Lauren B. Resnick, a University of Pittsburgh educational psychologist who studies instruction, said reporters can learn a lot about a school, and the quality of its leadership, by asking to attend a staff meeting. "You should hear conversations about teaching, learning, pupils and curriculum," she said. "They should be talking about more than test scores. They should be talking about what kids are supposed to learn, and, if the topic of the meeting is math, working on math problems together."

Such conversations, she said, are evidence that the school has what is called a "professional learning community."

"Principals have to be instructional leaders, and that means they are the teachers of their teachers," Resnick said. "But there's more and more evidence that there's a certain kind of professional community in the schools that work. You can call it various things ... but the evidence is pretty great. It's the principal's job to create that and sustain that."

Unfortunately, Resnick doesn't see such interactions as often as she'd like in schools across the nation. More often what she sees are principals who spend their time "maintaining order and making sure demands are met and



that test scores don't go down. Principals don't spend very much of their time in classrooms working on instruction, even when time is made for that. People do what they know how to do, and if being an instructional leader is something you don't know how to do very well, you're not going to do it."

Kathleen Mayer created a professional learning community at Rachel Carson in Chicago. A report on the school by Designs for Change, a Chicago-based education research organization, said another reason for the school's success was the strong relationship Mayer and her teachers established between the school and the community.

But the school's 65 teachers, all hand-picked by Mayer, built upon that foundation a solid structure for learning – for the students as well as themselves. (Note that

“There’s more and more evidence that there’s a certain kind of professional community in the schools that work.”

Lauren B. Resnick
University of
Pittsburgh

most principals cannot choose their teachers.) Carson teachers understood that they were all part of a team and were expected to “consistently act on the view that they are learners.” Carson teachers interviewed by the Hechinger Institute said they had a great deal of professional freedom but also knew what Mayer expected of them. Mayer and her staff closely monitored their teaching, insisting on engaging reading and math lessons that required students to

think, write, and discuss – not just put their heads down and complete work sheets. But the school did not neglect the basics of phonics and math facts.

Success in urban schools can sometimes be difficult to find, and achieving it is exhausting work. But when one encounters success, it's worth asking how it came about.

The (Portland) Oregonian in fall 2006 identified an elementary, middle, and high school that had made great gains in test scores. The team of reporters used the positive test results to gain entrée to the schools, with the goal of finding out exactly what accounted for the improvement. They found three very different methods. But in each school, they found leaders who had rallied their troops and were committed to the task at hand.³ The effort led to a three-day package of front-page stories. ■

¹ Michael DiPaola and Megan Tschannen-Moran, “The Principalship at a Crossroads: A Study of the Conditions and Concerns of Principals,” *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin* 87 (2003): 43-65.

² Christina A. Samuels, “Managers Help Principals Balance Time,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 13, 2008.

³ Amy Hsuan, Steven Carter, Suzanne Pardington, “Standout Schools: Making the Grade,” *The (Portland) Oregonian*, May 6-8, 2007.

★ Leadership Coverage ★

FROM “THE RISE AND FALL OF THANDIWE PEEBLES,”
MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE BY STEVE BRANDT.
JANUARY 29, 2006.

Steve Brandt of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* filed this analysis after superintendent Thandiwe Peebles resigned in 2006.

“Quickly there were signs relationships might be her downfall. Peebles scotched the traditional introductory press interviews, sending the message she had but five weeks to get ready for the first day of school. The district's public relations chief quit within days of Peebles' arrival.

...She drew cheers, even a standing ovation, when she pledged to back [teachers] up on student discipline. Teacher union chief Louise Sundin, who stood at her shoulder that day, would later say it was an unkept promise.

Peebles made the rounds of schools, but her style was puzzling to some. She had been trained in a walk-through protocol that minimized interaction with school staff; to some teachers that came off as aloof or arrogant...

Peebles plucked district workers out of the headquarters bureaucracy to drive for her or accompany her on appointments, then just as quickly dropped them. She laid plans for an \$80,000 remodeling of a corner of the headquarters for a new office, citing security reasons. She dropped the remodeling just ahead of adverse publicity...

She arrived just as the district received the news that seven of its schools had tested so poorly they could soon face sanctions under the No Child Left Behind law. She responded with a crash program to help those schools do better on the next round of tests. “You're mine,” she told their principals. She emphasized quick assessments of data and intensive test preparation.

Although Peebles developed some strong community supporters, she largely neglected the other crucial half of her job – building a wider circle of relationships.

“Her strengths are in curriculum and instruction and she went after that like a bulldog, with apparently successful results,” said Sue Eyestone, longtime observer of the Minneapolis schools “Then we started to get the stories about lack of skills in communication, management and politics...”



What Teachers Want in a Principal: Fairness, Support

A healthy campus culture promotes effectiveness; a 'toxic' one leads to inertia and discord.

By Liz Willen

If you ask teachers what they need most to succeed, the answer you'll hear from rookies to veterans alike is often remarkably similar: a supportive but demanding principal.

"A principal sets the tone for the entire school and should demand and expect accountability of everyone," said Yvonne Griffin, a veteran teacher in Hartford, Conn. Griffin, the recipient of several teaching awards, defines an effective principal as one who is honest, fair, sets high standards and holds everyone to them.

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the subtext for the education stories we write. We don't write about theory or methodology; we tell stories about people. And the way people lead or react to leadership provides the interactions that make people real. We recently wrote about the large number of new principals coming to the district and, in part, the obstacles they faced – especially those who were taking over challenging schools. We took readers through one new principal's day and his many tasks and obligations. It helped make leadership and the difficulties associated with the job more real to readers.

**MIKE TRAUTMANN,
(LOUISVILLE) COURIER-JOURNAL**



school should try to spend some time in the teachers lounge to get a sense of the school's emotional health. Journalists also should seek out teachers who eat lunch alone in their rooms to get their take. Kathleen Mellor, a Rhode Island middle school teacher, judges principals by what she calls "the five P's": present, positive, professional, personal and perspective.

When Jamie Matus was just out of graduate school, she taught third grade in an elementary school with poor test scores on Manhattan's Lower East Side. She said teachers received little support from the principal and turnover was high. "All he'd say is, 'You have got to get the test scores up,' but he never gave us any idea how to do it," Matus said. "You never heard him talking about children. He was in his office on his computer, all day long."

The following year, Matus worked for a principal in Brooklyn who was in and out of classrooms, providing tips and encouragement to teachers and letting them know how much she valued and expected of them.

"She was so passionate, so inspiring – every meeting we had I fell more in love with her," Matus said. "Her expectations were so clear, you didn't want to let her down. She knew the curriculum up and down, and she knew exactly what we were teaching and why."

Shana Frazin, who taught elementary school in California before becoming a staff developer with the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, said she wanted a principal who "knew her stuff instructionally." She also wanted a principal who could converse about fiction and nonfiction as well as professional literature. "Schools should be intellectual communities," she said.

Frazin said the best principals find ways to reward teachers who work harder and are more effective than others. Principals almost always are prevented by union contracts from giving merit raises or bonuses. But they can give good teachers more opportunities to attend professional conferences, provide them with a budget to buy professional materials and even let them use the copying machine more often. "Lots and lots of schools reward incompetence so

How important is a good principal to teachers? A study by the public interest polling organization Public Agenda found that, given a choice of a more supportive principal or more money, 82 percent would opt for more support.¹ Good leaders make sure their teachers have the resources and training they need to meet expectations while continuously improving and learning. But it's more than that. Good principals create a "set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the persona of the school," said Kent D. Peterson, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The culture influences "the ways people think, feel and act," he said.

In some schools, Peterson told journalists at a Hechinger Institute seminar, the culture is "toxic." Such schools, he has written, "reinforce inertia, blame students for lack of progress, discourage collaboration, and often have hostile relations among staff. These schools are not healthy for staff or students."

Peterson said journalists who want to get to know a



that the least effective teachers get the easiest class ... whereas if you're good, you get more piled on your plate," she said.

University of Georgia Professor Joseph Blasé says that in a school with a positive climate, "You'll hear the word 'we' and will see it in the faces and body language of the teachers." Reporters also should pick up on tension, if it exists. "You'll see a coldness in the classroom," he said.

However, Carolyn J. Riehl, a professor at Teachers College, warned journalists not to mistake lack of disagreement with a healthy culture. In a healthy school, she told the Hechinger Institute, it should be possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

DO PRINCIPALS ENCOURAGE TEACHERS TO TAKE RISKS? DO THEY RECOGNIZE AND REWARD GOOD TEACHING? DO THEY ENCOURAGE TEACHERS TO HELP ONE ANOTHER? DO THEY MONITOR PERFORMANCE?

Good principals support teachers in ways simple and profound – both making sure they have the basics and are protected from whatever might distract them or undermine their teaching. Matthew Delaney, a high school teacher in Whitman, Mass., told a Hechinger Institute seminar that a good principal is like Gore-Tex, the lightweight

material used in outdoor clothing. "Effective principals ... allow you to move freely to do what you need to do," he said, "while filtering out the bad."

Reporters should ask principals how receptive they are to teachers' ideas and ask the teachers the same question. Do principals encourage teachers to take risks? Do they find ways to recognize and reward good teaching? How do they do so? Do they encourage teachers to help one another and, if so, do they schedule time for that to happen? Do they encourage outside training and professional development? How do they monitor performance?

"The principal is absolutely everything," said Erin McCarthy, a 31-year-old special education teacher in New York City. "When you like who you work for, you want to please them."

Jessica Sowell, a Hartford elementary school teacher, worked under three principals in seven years. She values above all a principal who can articulate a vision – and a strong passion for teaching as a profession.

"Feeling that someone believes in you is a clincher," she said. **H**

¹ Teresa Mendez, "How Do the New Teachers Measure Up?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 8, 2005.

★ Leadership Coverage ★

**FROM "LAUSD'S LEADERSHIP PROBLEM,"
LOS ANGELES TIMES, FEB. 27, 2008**

An editorial in the Los Angeles Times discusses the difficulty Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent David L. Brewer was having hiring top officials.

“To be sure, Brewer has been mightily distracted over the last year by the still-messy payroll fiasco. But this is exactly what the L.A. schools cannot afford to do, lurch from one issue-of-the-moment to another. Brewer, who has no real background in public education, has been either unwilling or unable to forge connections with the people who could help him locate and woo smart deputies. Under his stewardship, the district still lacks a strategic plan or even a few swift, top priorities to propel it forward.

This isn't all Brewer's fault. The new board is highly politicized and overly inclined to impose its own biases on Brewer's hiring decisions. It has failed as much as anyone to articulate a new vision. It's not the same board that hired Brewer, which puts him in a weak position to stand up to his employers. Residual bad feeling among the district's old guard continues to color its interactions with the mayor's office, which tried but failed to win a governance role in the schools. At the same time that all of this is roiling at the management level, the district's giant central bureaucracy slowly churns on, as impenetrable and unaccountable as ever.

By this time, Brewer's failure to hire his senior team is itself a disincentive to possible candidates. Both the district and its chief look lethargic and inexpert. This is the conundrum that faces the L.A. public schools: To attract good leadership, it has to have good leadership. ”

Leadership Crisis: A Case of Quality, Not Quantity?

Training programs abound, but few prepare superintendents and principals for today's challenges.

Age, weariness, frustration and the rising demands of the job are thinning the ranks of principals and superintendents, and not enough fresh recruits are lining up to take their place.

It's a warning often voiced by professional administrator groups, blue-ribbon commissions and school district superintendents. And the media have paid attention, producing frequent stories about a dearth of good candidates. But the reality is more complicated. Research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation has concluded that "there is no statistical evidence of a shortage of certified candidates for the principalship."¹ The foundation noted, however, that certified does not mean qualified. And it acknowledged that "large, problem-plagued districts ... tend to attract fewer candidates, with generally weaker credentials and less experience."

Carlos Garcia was building and staffing 10 to 15 schools a year when he was superintendent in the fast-growing district of Clark County, Nev. The pool of candidates from which to select principals for those schools was far less qualified and experienced than would have been true a decade earlier.

"Used to be you'd interview people who had been vice principals, served on district-wide committees, had trained teachers, and served in other leadership positions," said Garcia, who is now superintendent in San Francisco. These days, he said, the new principals have typically been a vice principal for only a couple years. "There are individuals who can be successful doing that, but that's the exception, not the rule."

To fill the gap, he said, Clark County trained its own principals and recruited retired principals from out of state to serve for a few years.

The problem could well get worse. The average age of principals is rising as veterans retire and more of the replacements that districts hire are over 40 years old.²

TOO MANY MARGINAL PROGRAMS

But the seemingly commonsense solutions to the supply problem – expand existing training programs or create new ones – miss the mark, policy analysts say. The nation's education schools awarded more than 15,000 master's degrees and 2,300 doctorates (Ed.Ds) in leadership in 2003, far more than the demand for principals or superintendents.³ Google "administrative credential programs" or "master's in education administration" and you'll see myriad programs recruiting students by promising easy admis-

sion. Course work can be done at night, weekends, and online through for-profit colleges such as the University of Phoenix, National University, Capella University, Walden University, Argosy University and others. Indeed, rather than a shortage of training programs, the problem may be that there are too many of marginal quality. A 1987 report from the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration concluded that "fewer than



Arthur Levine
Woodrow Wilson
Foundation
Leadership programs
"are engaged in a race
to the bottom."

200 of the 505 graduate programs in educational administration were capable of meeting necessary standards of excellence."⁴ The rest, the report concluded, should be closed.

In his 2005 report called *Educating School Leaders*, former Teachers College President Arthur Levine wrote that the number of graduate school programs in educational administration had, instead of shrinking, increased to 600, and he too called for weak programs to be improved or shuttered. He wrote that many programs are engaged in a "race to the bottom," in which they lower admission standards to admit anyone who can pay tuition while making it easier to obtain a degree quickly and conveniently.⁵

One reason for the growth is demand, and a major reason for the demand is that teachers who earn a master's degree are rewarded with higher salaries under most labor contracts. Another is that many states are requiring teachers to take classes in order to remain certified. Administrative courses, often, are the easiest to pass, and the programs can be highly profitable. Many of the instructors are retired administrators who serve as low-cost adjuncts. There is little accountability for the quality of the programs because many of the students do not intend to become principals and districts are not choosy when hiring. Also, there is often little oversight from states beyond making sure that, at least on paper, the classes cover required material.

Principal preparation programs are criticized for failing to incorporate meaningful in-school training with successful leaders, not emphasizing instructional leadership, and focusing too much on developing "politically correct" attitudes about education rather than on how to manage and lead. The criticisms are not new – administrator



training programs have been found wanting ever since graduate schools began offering them early in the 20th century.⁶ The programs were important, however, because they served to identify candidates for school leadership jobs as the number of public schools grew rapidly. By regulating the programs, and requiring principals to earn a license, states could exercise some control over quality. Potential administrators were happy to enroll because the programs “provided a proven route to entering a higher-status, better-paying profession than teaching.”⁷

Why should journalists care about this history and these issues? One reason is that it helps explain why, despite unprecedented pressure from policy-makers,

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

In my years of education reporting, I've never found a high-achieving school that was not led by a high-performing principal.

These leaders are not always charismatic or dynamic, but they always

have a passion about seeing all students succeed. They help their teachers find good reform strategies and then inspire them to make the reforms work.

**BILL GRAVES,
THE (PORTLAND) OREGONIAN**



school district leaders, researchers and foundations, the preparation of leaders is slow to change. The system still serves the purposes it was designed for, even if it may not turn out principals ready to dramatically improve the performance of schools.

“We retain a system of recruitment, preparation, and induction that does not recruit the leaders we need, does not prepare them for their positions, does not reward them on par with their responsibilities and locks out candidates with vital knowledge and expertise,” writes Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute.⁸

Even so, leadership preparation in the United States is undergoing many changes, and states, school districts, university-based programs, and new nonprofit and for-profit organizations all are experimenting with different formulas. Journalists who pay attention to these changes will come up with many good stories.

STATES TAKING ACTION

Because principals are required to obtain administrative licenses, states have a tremendous amount of leverage to force leadership programs to change. Reporters can start with the state legislature when trying to find out what is being done to help principals lead school improvement.

Forty-six states have adopted standards for administrator certification and preparation programs; 41 states have endorsed what are known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards. (Reporters will hear the odd acronym of ISLLC, which, in education parlance, is pronounced IS-lick.)⁹

While universities will say they adhere to the ISLLC standards, there is no way to measure the quality of those programs. Nor are there consequences for low quality. Moreover, the standards define knowledge and skills but offer little guarantee that principals will know how to apply those skills to improve learning.¹⁰ The standards are being revised to include a way to gauge principals’ performance and to emphasize the importance of improving learning for all children, while not neglecting principals’ management responsibilities.

A few states have focused their credentialing requirements more on teaching and learning, but most have not. A survey by researchers at the University of Washington found that only six states put the primary focus of leadership preparation and credentialing on knowledge and skills connected to teaching and learning.¹¹

Another 28 give that content but a minor role. The same study found that the credentialing criteria in most states emphasize background checks and academic degrees, or specific knowledge and skills, or some combination of both. But the criteria “don’t clearly sum to a meaningful definition of the job” and “neither [licensure or academic degrees] ... represents a set of qualifications on which the public may rely or the profession depend.”¹²

While a number of states have made the process of becoming an administrator more flexible, all of them require that administrators were first teachers. Hess argues that former teachers are less likely than others to be demanding managers of their former peers. He suggests putting lead teachers in charge of instruction while giving overall responsibility for the school to a competent leader with a management background.

TARGETING WEAK PROGRAMS

In some states, the legislature and governor have been strong advocates for change. Iowa, for example, now requires programs to prepare principals to be instructional leaders. The state recently declined to accredit four of its nine programs because they didn’t meet its standards.¹³ Iowa is now turning its sights on weak superintendent preparation pro-



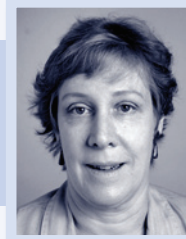
grams. The state also created a statewide leadership academy and requires districts to provide all first-time principals with mentors.

Those policies are considered sound. But Judy Jeffrey, the director of the Iowa Department of Education, said

THOUGHTS on LEADERSHIP

sing leadership as a framework, we have transformed boilerplate coverage of superintendent searches and principal retirements – stuff that must be covered but usually is deadly dull. We have been including context about the shrinking leadership pool and its causes. When we ask about newly hired principals and superintendents, we ask not only about their biographies but also about their vision for the school or district. When frustrated by secretive searches, we can inquire about the specific criteria being used to evaluate candidates and how those criteria were chosen. When contracts of leaders are extended, we are asking, “What is it you said you would do when you started and what progress are you making toward reaching those goals?”

**LANNING TALIAFERRO,
FORMERLY EDUCATION EDITOR OF
THE (WHITE PLAINS, N.Y.)
JOURNAL NEWS**



in November 2007 that the state still faces several challenges. Among them: serving the largely rural state with five leadership preparation programs instead of nine, which creates logistical problems; preparing administrators for their management duties, which haven't gone away; creating a corps of trained mentors who can help rookies in their first position; and, finally, figuring out how to recruit top teachers into serving as principals.¹⁴

Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee all have pressured poor-quality leadership preparation programs to update their training programs and have shut down those failing to do so. Massachusetts passed a law in 2001 giving school districts and other organizations the power to bypass schools of education and offer credentialing programs. In 2005, Missouri began requiring leadership preparation programs to assign a mentor to work with their graduates in their first year on the job. In fact, 22 states now require principals to be provided a mentor during their first year or so on the job.

What has been the effect of these state efforts? Do new principals in the districts you cover feel better prepared? Do they feel like they're getting enough on-the-job support? What do they think about the mentoring they're supposed to get?

Mentoring is frequently mentioned as a way to help new principals adjust to their responsibilities. But what

does that mean? How much time do principals spend with their mentor? Do they work side by side, solving real problems? Or, does the mentor merely drop by now and then or just make a telephone call? Have the mentors been trained for this coaching role? A study by The Wallace Foundation

suggests reporters will find good stories here if they seek them. Many mentoring programs focus on campus management at the expense of instructional leadership; mentors get little training; programs are too short; and they're underfunded. Moreover, few districts have collected data that would allow them to rigorously assess “whether the behavior of leaders actually changed as a result of the mentoring.”¹⁵

**THE PROBLEM WITH
EDUCATION SCHOOLS**

According to Levine's study of education schools, nearly 90 percent of the principals leading schools today were trained in traditional programs on a college campus. While schools of education are experiencing competition from school districts that do their own training, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies, the reality is that most new principals will continue to receive their training in education schools.

The Southern Regional Education Board has been among the harshest critics of university principal preparation programs. Several SREB reports have urged states and universities to intensify their efforts to make the programs more demanding and more focused on instructional improvement. One of the organization's most recent reports, called “Schools Can't Wait: Accelerating the Redesign of University Preparation Programs,” looked at the efforts of Southern universities considered to be pacesetters. But the SREB researchers' conclusions were not encouraging.¹⁶

The report said researchers found only “episodic change in a few institutions” and that state policies had yet to lead to “the deeper change that would ensure all candidates master the knowledge and skills to be effective school leaders today.” It said there was a lack of urgency for refocusing the programs on the needs of schools and student achievement. Little will change, the report said, until states, universities and school districts commit themselves to the effort.

James E. “Gene” Bottoms of the Southern Regional



Education Board said at a Hechinger Institute seminar that many of the programs in the South were little more than “drive-by diploma mills.” Vincent L. Ferrandino, the executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, says that often such programs are “cash cows” for the colleges, giving them little incentive to change. Hess studied 31 programs and found little evidence that they prepare principals with the management skills – in how to use data, technology, hiring, and rigorous evaluation of performance – needed to improve school and student performance.¹⁷

But Margaret Orr, a professor at Bank Street College of Education in New York City, told a Hechinger Institute seminar that university programs are starting to shift their emphasis from “degree preparation to career preparation.” University programs are collaborating more with school districts and are doing more of the training in clinical settings at schools.

WHAT JOURNALISTS SHOULD LOOK FOR

Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues studied eight exemplary training programs: four college programs that prepare principals for their first administrator job and four that provide principals who are already leading schools with additional on-the-job training. Their report, called “Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World,” provides a detailed map for what journalists should look for when reporting on the quality of these programs.¹⁸

Among the important elements of such programs are:

- A coherent curriculum based on recognized professional standards.
- An emphasis on instructional leadership.
- Lessons that engage students in solving real-world problems, provide lots of feedback from peers and professors, and stimulate thinking.
- Knowledgeable, experienced professors.
- Formal mentoring and advising by expert principals.
- Internships that involve real work, supervised by mentors.
- “Vigorous, targeted recruitment and selection” to seek out expert teachers to become principals.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that such programs are not cheap. For principal candidates to have

time to gain on-the-job experience as interns, they have to be paid a professional salary while still in training.

Reporters need not become experts in how best to design training programs. But it is worth asking local superintendents whether they’re satisfied with the principal candidates they’re getting from university programs. How would they like to see the programs change? Who is teaching in these college programs? Are traditional programs losing students to competitors?

WHAT ARE SCHOOL DISTRICTS DOING?

Partly out of frustration with the quality of local university programs, a growing number of school districts are training their own principals. Among them are Springfield and Boston in Massachusetts, Atlanta, New York, St. Louis, Eugene (Oregon), Chicago, and Jefferson County (Kentucky). Two of the examples, Springfield and Boston, combine 10 weeks of summer classes over two summers tailored to the district’s instructional approach and a six-week internship with a veteran administrator. The educators earn graduate school credits at the University of Massachusetts. The programs aggressively recruit top teachers, reach out to Latino and African-American educators, and are very selective in who earns admission.

“We look at different skills than university programs do,” said Ann Southworth, the chief academic officer in

THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

If you are trying to understand how a school works and succeeds, you could do a lot worse than focus on the principal. The problem is that a lot of principals are failing. Part of the reason for that is poor training and lack of support. Part of the reason is lack of strategic thinking and implementation. But a word of caution: Snap judgments on the performance of a principal or a school are dangerous. Perhaps the bottom line is to measure everything against one yardstick: Does it help children? That’s how the best principals and teachers and superintendents view what they do.

PAUL BROOKS, (MIDDLETOWN, N.Y.) TIMES HERALD-RECORD

Springfield. “Not just their ability to write, but their history of dealing with pressure. We’re looking to see if by nature they have the skills and talents needed to be a leader of a school.”

Oscar Santos became a principal in Boston after completing the district’s administrator preparation program. During his training, Santos studied family and community engagement and learned to develop a school budget, supervise others and understand the culture of a school.



“I learned what the life of a principal is,” Santos said during a Hechinger seminar on leadership. “It offered me a great opportunity to learn how to become a better principal, a better administrator. What it really entails is

- Do the districts have a plan for how to pay for these programs, once the private money supporting them dries up? How are the districts tracking the performance of these principals?

NONPROFIT AND FOR-PROFIT COMPETITORS

The university programs and districts also have competition from for-profit schools that boast of how quickly educators can earn a credential. Find out from the human resources office in the school districts you cover whether principals are being hired out of programs run by for-profit businesses. Most major cities have outlets of the University of Phoenix or one of the other for-profit colleges offering these programs. Much of the coursework of these programs is accessed online. While they can be expensive, such programs are often more convenient than traditional routes into administrative jobs.

In addition, some districts are welcoming candidates from private, nonprofit agencies that are subsidized by foundations and the federal government.

One such program is New Leaders for New Schools, a fast-growing nonprofit training principals in Baltimore, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, Memphis, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New York City, Prince George’s County and Washington, D.C. The program is highly selective, admitting only 7 percent of applicants in 2007. Those admitted attend five weeks of intensive classes in the summer and then spend a year working at the side of an effective mentor principal. Once they’ve been hired as principals, they continue to receive support and mentoring for several years.

Another entity providing principal training is the National Institute for School Leadership. The institute is supported by foundations, including The Broad Foundation, Carnegie Corp., New Schools Venture Fund and others. The institute offers face-to-face and Web-based leadership training to principals around the country.

If these programs are operating in the districts you cover, it would be worth a look to find out whether they are doing the job.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Even as new for-profit, nonprofit or school district-based training programs pop up, they have to fit into the existing regulatory structure and hiring practices. That structure is composed of state bureaucracies, higher education, school districts, administrator professional groups and the educators themselves. Reporters also should think about the incentives in the system. Given an easy route to an

Photo courtesy of Montgomery County Public Schools



Jerry Weast, the superintendent of schools in Montgomery County, Md., receives \$489,000 per year in total annual compensation, making him one of the highest paid in the country. Superintendents are demanding higher salaries due to concern about a lack of job security, demands to raise test scores, and a dwindling number of qualified candidates willing to take on such pressure-cooker positions.

sitting down and listening, trying to figure out a point of view and how you can make sure that you reach the point where you can help the students.”

Such programs depend on outside funding from foundations such as The Wallace Foundation and The Broad Foundation of Los Angeles. They also are experimental, which should raise questions for journalists:

- Are graduates of these alternative courses getting jobs as principals when they finish?
- Are the graduates any more successful than traditionally trained principals?
- Do they feel they’re well prepared once they are on the job?



administrative license and a more substantive one, most working educators will choose the former. Until states and districts make it worthwhile to go the more rigorous route, most educators will not do more than is necessary.

Reporters can do their community a real favor if they find out where the district's principals got their credential training and then look into the quality of these

HOW EXPLICIT IS THE TRAINING? DOES IT CONSIST OF GENERALITIES SUCH AS "ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN"? OR, DOES THE TRAINING HELP CANDIDATES UNDERSTAND HOW TO OBSERVE INSTRUCTION AND QUICKLY IDENTIFY ITS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES? DOES THE TRAINING HELP CANDIDATES USE DATA TO MONITOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEIR TEACHERS AND THE NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS?

programs. How specific and explicit is the training? What do the candidates for the job of principal learn about leading instruction? Does it consist of generalities such as "all children can learn"? Or, does the training help candidates understand how to observe instruction and quickly identify its strengths and weaknesses? Does the training, for example, help candidates learn how to use data to monitor the effective-

ness of their teachers and the needs of their students? Does it tell them what options they might consider when, for example, the data shows that high-achieving students stall in math in the fourth grade?

Do the programs teach them about managing people? Evaluating people? Helping them improve? Using resources strategically? Hess worries that even when leadership preparation programs delve into human management issues, they don't draw on the kinds of insights that are commonly taught in business schools. So, do the reading lists of the leadership programs in your area include such business gurus as Jack Welch?

One source of pressure to get leadership preparation programs to change could be the school districts that will be hiring their graduates. If those who complete an administrative credentialing program cannot get hired by local districts, authorities might take notice. But, in fact, most school districts have not changed their criteria for

what they are looking for in a principal.¹⁹

The best superintendents today, however, recognize that success depends on hiring effective, results-oriented principals to run the schools. After Judith Johnson became superintendent in Peekskill, N.Y., she redefined the role of the principal and demanded improved results. In her first three years, five principals resigned. All of them, she said, were fully trained and had earned graduate degrees from prestigious universities. Today, she said, "Principals are expected to be instructional leaders, astute financial managers, creative grant writers and developers of their own learning communities." ■■

— Melissa Payton contributed reporting to this article.

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Susan Gates, et al., *Who Is Leading Our Schools? An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers* (RAND Education, 2003) xiv.
- 4 Robert T. Stout, Daniel Edward Griffiths and National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, *Leaders for America's Schools* (McCutchan, 1987).
- 5 Arthur Levine, *Educating School Leaders* (The Education Schools Project, March 2005).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Frederick M. Hess, *A License to Lead: A New Leadership Agenda for America's Schools* (Progressive Policy Institute, 21st Century Schools Project, January 2003).
- 9 Council of Chief State School Officers, Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium, accessed on Feb. 20, 2008, at http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_Consortium_on_School_Leadership/ISLLC_Standards/
- 10 The Wallace Foundation, *Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among State, District and School Policies and Practices*, 2006. Accessible at www.wallacefoundation.org
- 11 Jacob E. Adams Jr. and Michael A. Copland, *When Learning Counts: Rethinking Licenses for School Leaders* (The Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2005). Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and accessible at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/ELAN/TR/KnowledgeCategories/ImprovingConditions/Governance/Training+Resource.2.13.06.htm>
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Richard Colvin, Linda Darling-Hammond, Christine DeVita and Kati Haycock, *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform* (New York City: The Wallace Foundation, 2007). Accessible at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/ABridgetoSchoolReform.htm?byrb=1>
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Betty Fry, Kathy O'Neill, Gene Bottoms, *Schools Can't Wait: Accelerating the Redesign of University Principal Preparation Programs* (Southern Regional Education Board, 2006). Accessible at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/SchoolsCantWait.htm>
- 17 Frederick M. Hess and Andrew Kelly, *The Accidental Principal* (Stanford University: Hoover Institution, 2005).
- 18 Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson and Margaret Orr, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs* (Stanford University: Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007). Accessible at <http://seli.stanford.edu>
- 19 Marguerite Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly a Shortage of School Principals?* (University of Washington: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003) 45.



Expert Sources on Leadership Topics

These researchers, academics and educators can help journalists see the big picture.

Education Politics

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Equity and Leadership

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Useful Web Sites on Education Leadership

Organizations provide data, publications and research results that can inform coverage.

Alliance for Excellent Education

<http://www.all4ed.org>

National policy and advocacy organization. Provides resources to administrators and other audiences to increase student preparedness for post-secondary education.

American Association of School Administrators

www.aasa.org

Membership organization that conducts research and supplies data on senior level school administrators.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

<http://www.ascd.org/>

Membership organization that emphasizes leadership and professional development. Publisher of Educational Leadership.

Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement

www.education.umn.edu/CAREI

Researches leadership practices and their effects on teachers and students. Based at the University of Minnesota.

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

<http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/>

Focuses on systemic improvement of teaching and learning. Based at the University of Washington.

Center on Reinventing Public Education University of Washington

<http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/>

Source of a number of important studies of leadership and leadership training.

Council of Chief State School Officers

www.ccsso.org

Membership organization that includes most state commissioners of education. Provides consensus views on a number of educational issues.

Council of the Great City Schools

www.cgcs.org

Advocacy and information organization for major urban school systems.

Education Commission of the States

www.ecs.org

Serves governors and state governments on education issues. A good source for overviews of policies in states.

The Education Trust

<http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust>

Advocates for equitable education through good teaching and leadership.

The Finance Project

<http://www.financeproject.org/>

Conducts research on school finance.

Institute for Educational Leadership

<http://www.iel.org/>

Provides professional development to education leaders.

Institute for Learning

<http://www.instituteforlearning.org/>

Provides educational leadership training to promote better teaching, primarily in urban school districts.

James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy

www.hunt-institute.org

Independent university-based organization that works on a variety of policy issues, including leadership.

National Association of Elementary Principals

www.naesp.org

Membership organization and source of good data and overviews of issues.

National Association of Secondary School Principals

www.nassp.org

Membership organization and source of good data and overviews of issues.

National Association of State Boards of Education

<http://www.nasbe.org/>

Membership organization that helps state boards work on leadership and other issues.

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education

www.ncate.org

Accrediting group for college and university programs to train principals and superintendents.

National Governors Association

www.nga.org

Serves governors and their staffs and helps them develop policy on education and other issues.

National Institute for School Leadership

www.ncee.org/nisl

Helps school districts nationally prepare their principals to be instructional leaders.

National School Boards Association

www.nsba.org

Advocacy and information organization for school board members.

National Staff Development Council

<http://www.nsd.org/>

Membership organization that provides professional development programs for educators to improve student performance.

New Leaders for New Schools

www.nlms.org

Private, nonprofit organization that serves as an alternative source of principals, many of them nontraditional candidates.

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

www.oise.utoronto.ca

Research center based at the University of Toronto. Michael Fullan and Kenneth Leithwood, two prominent leadership scholars, are associated with it.

Public Agenda

<http://publicagenda.org/>

Research organization that provides information on public opinions on a number of topics, including education issues.

RAND Education

<http://www.rand.org/education/>

Conducts research and provides analysis on a number of education topics, including leadership.

Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform

www.schlechtycenter.org

Examines the role of school leaders in reform.

Southern Regional Education Board

www.sreb.org

Helps educational leaders and policy-makers in Southern states. Hosts the Learning-Centered Leadership Program.

Stanford Educational Leadership Institute

www.seli.stanford.edu

Studies leadership issues.

Wallace Foundation

www.wallacefoundation.org

Offers grants in the field of educational leadership. Site's knowledge center posts many important reports. Can provide national overviews.



Current Publications

Beyond the Rankings:
Measuring Learning in Higher Education
September 2006

Change and Controversy on Campus: The Tough
Questions Reporters and Editors Should Ask
November 2006

From Contracts to Classrooms:
Covering Teachers Unions
April 2007

Reporting on Classrooms and Teaching
October 2007

Upcoming Publications

The Hechinger Institute Guide to
Education Research for Journalists
July 2008

Covering the Campaign to Expand Pre- K
September 2008

Community Colleges and the New Education Issues
September 2008

Understanding Academic Rigor
October 2008

A Journalist's Guide to Math Education
November 2008

Covering the Effects of State Budget Cuts
on Higher Education
November 2008

Check the Web site at www.tc.edu/hechinger to see when these publications will be available. Send an e-mail to Hechinger@tc.edu with your name and address to request a copy.

The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University, is dedicated to promoting fair, accurate and insightful coverage of education, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school, in all forms of media. The Institute holds seminars for national audiences of journalists, publishes guides and primers such as this as resources for journalists, and offers online courses and Webinars. The publications are available on our Web site, along with



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other resources, commentaries and analyses of education coverage. Journalists from news organi-

zations such as National Public Radio, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Miami Herald*, *USA Today* and others are regular participants. The Institute is named in memory of the late Fred M. Hechinger, a former Teachers College trustee and education editor of the *New York Times*. Support for the Institute and its work comes from a variety of national foundations including The Broad Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Kauffman Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, the Spencer Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation.

The Wallace Foundation

The Wallace Foundation is an independent, national foundation dedicated to supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. Its three current objectives are: strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement; enhancing out-of-school learning opportunities; and expanding participation in arts and culture. The foundation maintains a Knowledge Center of free publications on what it has learned at www.wallacefoundation.org.



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