

USA TODAY

Training programs for principals inadequate

By Greg Toppo

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Most of the college-level programs that train public school principals award "the equivalent of Green Stamps," allowing them to trade in primarily useless credits for raises and promotions without giving them the practical training they need, says the president of Columbia University's Teachers College.

In a study released Monday, Arthur Levine says the graduate schools he studied range from "inadequate to appalling" and need a radical face lift.

"There's no such thing as a good school with a bad principal, and the way we're preparing them now isn't very good," says Levine, who wrote the report as an independent researcher. He suggests that colleges create "the equivalent of an MBA" for principals, using courses both from colleges of education and business.

He says business schools are good at training managers to change organizations and deal with personnel issues -- a key to improving schools in a new era of accountability.

But in the past 15 years, he says, most schools that train principals have begun offering quick, easy degrees, watering down curricula, easing degree requirements and lowering admissions standards.

"Everybody benefits from the current system," he says, "except our children."

The report, funded by the Annenberg Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kaufmann Foundation, is the first in a series resulting from a four-year study of U.S. education schools. The next report, on teacher preparation, is due in September.

Educators have long complained that education schools take in vast amounts of cash, but that colleges and universities often use it to fund unrelated programs such as scientific research. Education schools are mainstays on most campuses, according to the U.S. Education Department. With 1,206 such programs, education accounts for one in 12 bachelor's degrees and one in four master's degrees.

In a written statement, three organizations of school principals and administrators said Levine's report confirms much of what they've been saying for years.

Arthur Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, agrees with Levine's analysis and most of his recommendations but says principal candidates are usually teachers with families and full-time classroom jobs. They're trying to earn advanced degrees at night or on weekends, but school districts "have made no investment through help with tuition, time off from work or offers of internships."

Susan Masterson, principal of Monroe Elementary School in Janesville, Wis., says mentoring programs are essential.

"Principals have to know so much more than they ever had to," she says. One big barrier to getting good principals: low pay. For many experienced teachers, the difference between their salary and that of a principal is "really minimal."

Top problems in education graduate programs

- * Irrelevant curriculum. Eighty-nine percent of alumni surveyed said they were not prepared to cope with classroom realities.

- * Low standards. Standardized test scores of students in leadership programs are among the lowest in academia.

- * Weak faculty. Just 6% of education faculty have been principals; just 2% superintendents.

- * Inadequate clinical instruction. Few programs set up mentoring relationships.

- * Inappropriate degrees. Too many degrees are in educational administration, often with no job relevance.

- * Poor research. Research is disconnected from practice.

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