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Leadership-Focused Coaching in Action: An Approach to Continuous Improvement and Supporting Public Schools

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Cite this article

Article abstract

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Leadership-Focused Coaching in Action: An Approach to Continuous Improvement and Supporting Public Schools

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Abstract

This article details the efforts of one program's collaborative efforts toward continuous improvement and strengthening partnerships with local school districts using Leadership-Focused Coaching, a research-based model for principal preparation programs. Practical experiences and lessons learned from the ongoing online program improvement and redesign initiative are shared. In advance of two accreditation visits, data and feedback were gathered from partner districts, recent graduates, current students, and employers, which helped to identify ways in which the program could better prepare instructional leaders. This article describes the efforts, successes, setbacks, and future plans of a group of professors working to improve a program while preparing for accreditation visits and strengthening district partnerships.

Résumé

Cet article détaille les efforts d'un programme spécifique de collaboration afin d'assurer une amélioration continue et un renforcement des partenariats avec des districts scolaires locaux au moyen du Leadership-Focused Coaching (coaching axé sur le leadership), lequel est un modèle basé sur la recherche pour les programmes visant à mieux former les directeurs d'école. Cet article partage les expériences et les leçons pratiques tirées d'une initiative en cours qui consiste à améliorer et reconcevoir le programme en ligne dont il est question dans l'article. Avant deux visites d'accrédita-

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tion, des données et des commentaires ont été recueillis auprès de districts partenaires, de diplômés récents, d'étudiants actuels et d'employeurs, ce qui a permis d'identifier les moyens par lesquels le programme pourrait mieux préparer les leaders pédagogiques. En somme, cet article décrit les efforts, les succès, les revers et les projets d'un groupe de professeurs travaillant à l'amélioration d'un programme tout en se préparant aux visites d'accréditation et en renforçant les partenariats avec les districts.

Keywords / Mots clés : leadership preparation, university-school partnerships, leadership field experience, leadership-focused coaching, leadership mentoring / préparation au leadership, partenariats université-école, expérience de terrain en matière de leadership, coaching axé sur le leadership, mentorat en matière de leadership

Introduction

This article describes one university's educational leadership program's collaborative efforts toward continuous improvement and strengthening partnerships with local school districts using Leadership-Focused Coaching (LFC), a research-based model for principal preparation programs. In preparation for two accreditation visits (state and national), the faculty members of one program realized the fully online program needed to be redesigned and aligned to state and national standards. Further improvements needed to be made, based on feedback gathered from various stakeholders (current students, recent graduates, alumni working in partner districts, representatives from partner districts, and current employers of students). This study shares the processes, efforts, successes, setbacks, innovative strategies, and steps yet to be taken by a group of professors working toward continuous improvement and stronger partnerships with districts. Lessons learned and practical experiences will be shared so that others can benefit from the collaborative approach and the program can be improved.

Trends in the literature

Recently, there has been a shift in principal preparation programs from a theory-to-practice approach to a knowledge-to-practice approach (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Cunningham, 2007; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Daresh, 2004). With this shift of emphasis, educational leadership programs can be more focused on providing aspiring leaders with real-world and practical experiences in K–12 schools and districts as part of course assignments and expectations (Cunningham, 2007; Geer, Anast-May, & Gurley, 2014; Gray, 2018b). Consequently, candidates should have more opportunities for early field experiences and the authentic practice of leadership skills in a school setting, rather than only theoretical in-class discussions or assignments (Geer et al., 2014; Gray, 2017; Wallace Foundation, 2016).

The trend for the last two decades has shifted from preparing administrators to developing instructional leaders (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Geer et al., 2014; New Leaders, 2012; Schleicher, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2016). The LFC model addresses the need for early field experiences,

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mentoring, and coaching from leadership experts (Gray, 2016, 2018b). Aspiring leaders benefit from hands-on, practical experiences in the K–12 setting with coaching and mentoring support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). When matched with effective principal mentors, candidates can benefit from the support, feedback, and experience of the instructional leader through discussions, constructive feedback, and critical reflections about leadership practices (Brown-Ferrigno, 2007; Geer et al. 2014; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Schleicher, 2012).

A report from the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute found that exemplary leadership preparation programs demonstrated the following: a philosophy and curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, opportunities to bridge the theoretical and practical through experiential learning, mentors providing support, and selective selection and recruitment processes with partner district recommendations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Schleicher, 2012; UCEA & New Leaders, 2016). As the demand for high-caliber leaders increases, it is essential for universities and school districts to work together (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010).

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study encompasses experiential learning and early field experiences for candidates, LFC from university faculty, and ongoing mentoring support from local school districts (see Figure 1). During the first phase, students would have field experiences embedded in each course. In the second phase, instructors would implement LFC as candidates participate in the internship or practicum semester in collaboration with a supervising school leader (Gray, 2018b).

The final part of the conceptual model involves mentoring support within the school district. Once in leadership positions, districts would select principal or district-level mentors for new instructional leaders. University instructors would support this by developing and providing ongoing mentoring workshops, professional development, and resources for such mentors.

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram of model

Early field experiences and experiential learning

Students are encouraged to work under the supervision of school or district leaders for a variety of field experiences (Pounder & Crow, 2005). In offering more opportunities for experiential learning during coursework, candidates expand their knowledge of leadership expectations and responsibilities (Figueiredo-Brown, Ringler, & James, 2015; New Leaders, 2012). It is critical for candidates to have practical, experiential learning opportunities while completing principal preparation coursework (Browne-Ferrigno &

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Muth, 2004; Cheney et al., 2010; Cunningham, 2007; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Daresh, 2004; Geer et al., 2014). Candidates need time to hone their leadership skills under the supervision of experienced school leaders and guidance of university faculty. By practicing and honing these skills, aspiring leaders are more likely to lead schools effectively and achieve school improvement (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008).

Leadership-focused coaching

Lucy West and Fritz C. Staub (2003) developed a model known as Content-Focused Coaching (CFC) for preparing novice mathematics teachers that involved coaching about best practices for teaching mathematics and providing specific feedback and instructional support. For this approach, the mathematics expert, the university faculty member, focuses on content-specific instructional strategies and skills while modeling, co-teaching, and designing lessons with the novice teacher (West & Staub, 2003). As lessons are planned collaboratively, the content-focused coach scaffolds the novice, who becomes more autonomous over time (Staub, West, & Bickel, 2003).

In contrast, this study describes an LFC model, which emphasizes leadership skills and responsibilities and supports for novice and aspiring instructional leaders. LFC differs from CFC in offering aspiring school leaders experiential learning and early field experiences. The leadership-focused coach, university faculty, provides support while candidates complete practicum courses. The coach observes the aspiring leader while conducting leadership-type tasks or responsibilities in a school setting, offering suggestions, building on strengths, and offering feedback. Finally, the coach supports the candidate in bridging the gap between theory and practice, shares relevant leadership and organizational theories, and models decision-making processes (Gray, 2016).

Mentoring support

The last phase of the model involves district-provided mentoring support for developing instructional leaders selected by the district. This support occurs within the school setting and smaller communities of practice, with university faculty members providing support and professional development for aspiring and mentor leaders as needed or at the request of district leaders (Best, 2006; Bickman, Goldring, De Andrade, Breda, & Goff, 2012; Cheney et al., 2010; Lochmiller, 2014; UCEA & New Leaders, 2016). Lochmiller surmised principal induction and mentoring are critical to the success of leadership preparation programs (Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2007; Lochmiller, 2014).

Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman (2003) describe new leader induction programs as an investment in onboarding, keeping, and promoting a growth mindset. Four significant benefits to developing leaders and districts are improved leadership practices; deeper understanding of policies, vision, and mission; more support of "the professional learning journey" (Lipton & Wellman, 2003, p. xii); and established norms for collaborative learning. While there are likely parallel lessons to be learned, there are certainly best practices in teacher preparation that could enhance leadership preparation and vice versa (Cochran & Reagan, 2021). The next section describes the theoretical framework.

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Theoretical framework

This study is founded on Boyer's (1990) Scholarship of Integration, which combines several concepts from various research fields to establish a new construct: LFC (Gray, 2018a, 2018b). Early field experiences, experiential learning, LFC, and mentoring support from district leaders and university faculty members comprise the model described in this study. The framework is established on Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) and Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as found in communities of practice. Organizational Change Theory was considered as related to the ongoing changes occurring in schools with instructional leaders acting as change agents. The final part of the framework considers the need for continuous school improvement, which is ever-present in schools (Orton & Weick, 1990).

Boyer's Scholarship of Integration model

Ernest Boyer (1990) divides the professoriate into four categories: scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. The Scholarship of Integration model allows researchers to connect across disciplines, "placing the specialties in larger context illuminating data in a revealing way" (p. 18). Scholars can link concepts from the literature from a variety of fields and interpret them differently. The research can fit "one's own research — or the research of others — into larger intellectual patterns" (p. 19). Figure 2 demonstrates the theoretical framework using the Scholarship of Integration approach, which is founded on Adult Learning Theory, the Theory of Situated Learning, Organizational Change Theory, and the Continuous School Improvement Model.

Figure 2: Theoretical framework for study

Adult learning theory

Theories of situated learning

Scholarship of integration

Organizational change theory

Continuous school improvement model
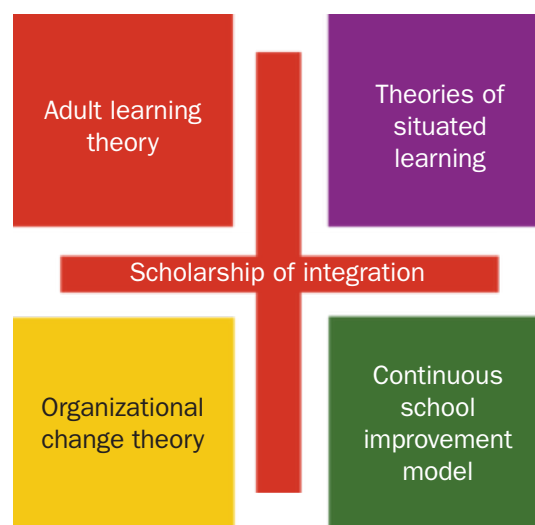
Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984) first introduced the concept of andragogy or Adult Learning Theory. Adult learners are characterized as "autonomous, motivated, and ready to embrace growth- oriented experiential based learning" (Richardson, 2015, p. 2071). Courses are designed to allow students to be self-directed, reflective, and able to receive feedback from instructors and peers (Knowles, 1984; Richardson, 2015). Therefore, aspiring leaders benefit from more critical reflection and discussion opportunities within course assignments (Gray, 2018b). Participation in this type of discourse allows developing leaders to gauge and refine their thinking in contrast to the perspectives of others (classmates, instructors, etc.).

Adult learners benefit from many opportunities to reflect critically on what they have experienced, realized, discovered, compared, contrasted, observed, and contextualized (Richardson, 2015). Many candidates will likely enter principal preparation programs with biases from past experiences, influencing how they conceptualize new

information as students. In learning others' perspectives and reflecting on their own beliefs and values about leadership and learning, adult learners begin to develop an understanding of their philosophies (Richardson, 2015). The characteristics of adult learners can inform the instructors as course curriculum and assignments are developed.

Situated Learning Theory

While researching how learning occurs, Jean Lave (1988) developed Situated Learning Theory to explain how knowledge is acquired contextually in the location where the learning occurs. Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) documented the way in which groups of people evolved into communities of practice as novices hone their skills and learn from one another in the field. Members of communities of practice tend to bond as they discuss common concerns, issues, or problems and deepen their expertise through such discussions (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Organizational Change Theory

Organizational changes are viewed as any "departures from the status quo or from smooth trends" (Huber & Glick, 1995, p. 3). Organizational Change Theory was first referenced in organizational behavior and theory literature by Henry Gantt (1919) and Hugo Münsterberg (1913), but it has evolved (Ott, Parkes, & Simpson, 2003). While Argyris (1970) is credited for defining the tenets of organizational change theory, Peter Senge (1990) refers to organizational change and learning as the "fifth discipline of 'systems thinking'" (Senge quoted in Ott et al., 2003, p. 442). For this study, change theory refers to the inevitability of change in schools, how school districts and university partners can face such changes, and the effects of change on principal preparation programs (Gray, 2018a).

Continuous School Improvement model

Continuous improvement has been mentioned in the business literature for decades, but only in the last 15 years for schools (Cheney et al., 2010; Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013). Continuous school improvement is defined as the continuous cycle of "creating the vision, gathering data related to that vision, analyzing the data, planning the work of the school to align with the vision, implementing the strategies and action steps outlined in the plan, and gathering data to measure the impact of the intervention" (Coalition of Essential Schools, 2016, para. 1). The Continuous School Improvement Model is founded on the belief that schools should always be focused on and working toward improvement and progress (Cheney et al., 2010; Park et al., 2013). For this study, this model of improvement is intended to address gaps in a principal preparation program and develop strategies for building stronger partnerships between local school districts and universities, which are described in the next section (Gray, 2018a).

Continuous improvement efforts

Central to the success of any graduate program is the process of using stakeholder feedback, student learning, and faculty and program evaluation data to guide the continuous improvement process (Rowley, 2003). If educational leadership programs

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are to remain relevant in this era of accountability, program evaluation and continuous improvement are core components of change efforts. These efforts in principal preparation programs are increasingly necessary for meeting rigorous accreditation standards. The push for improvement has increased awareness for program faculty to use data effectively for program improvement and overall changes. Lastly, the effectiveness of the continuous improvement process depends on the faculty's commitment to the process of using data and generating program improvement (Barker & Pinard, 2014).

Clinical approach to continuous improvement

A clinical approach was implemented to assess the program, in which several data sources were analyzed and goals were established for continuous improvement (see Figure 3). This approach to program evaluation allowed faculty to use these data sources to a) diagnose program strengths and areas of focus for improvement; b) determine the prognosis of the findings from data collection; c) prescribe changes and course improvement based on current data trends; and d) evaluate the effectiveness of changes (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Figure 3: Clinical cycle for continuous improvement

Three years ago, the program faculty members realized significant changes needed to be made to the program to ensure candidate success. It was determined that the program needed to have a more diverse student population, higher admissions criteria, and overall improvements. Baseline data were reviewed as part of the diagnosis of the program review. The data source, which triggered the initial need for programmatic review, was the significant number of students unable to pass the state certification test and graduate from the program. Even though the candidates scored above the state average, it was alarming to have a high number of students not passing the required test for certification and graduation. The faculty analyzed test results by standard and competency to determine the areas in need of improvement for students.

Diagnosis

Current data review processes provided faculty the opportunity to participate in monthly program-level meetings and annual data retreats to review and analyze the following: a) candidates' state licensure results—which are disaggregated for program use to determine strengths and areas of improvement according to the competencies—and program-level assessments; b) candidates' dispositions at entrance and exit; and c) employer and completer exit surveys. These data sets were used to identify trends, evaluate the effectiveness of courses/field experiences, and determine program strengths and areas where improvement is needed. The results identified the need for: a) a more diverse candidate pool; b) increased student pass rate on the state certification test; and c) improved student writing skills.

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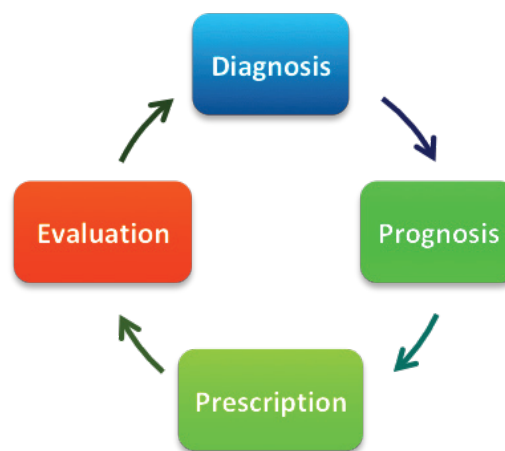
Prognosis

Candidates who pass the state certification exam demonstrate they have been prepared and have the potential to lead. It validates that candidates possess the knowledge and skills to improve student learning outcomes in their schools effectively. Furthermore, passing the state test allows potential principals to prove their understanding of school leadership and their ability to use data to drive instructional improvements and engage stakeholders in continuous improvement efforts. The program faculty members realized that over 100 students could not pass the state certification exam, which delayed their graduation from the program. Through the continuous improvement cycle (Figure 3), it was determined that these candidates needed another path to earning a master's degree. This was the tipping point for the program and prompted the revisioning of all program components. Data results indicated a starting point would be to implement more rigorous admissions criteria to attract candidates who would be more likely to do well in program courses and ultimately pass the certification test.

Prescription and treatment

Phase one

The faculty agreed that program student learning outcomes (SLOs) needed to be more aligned to the state and certification competencies. All program courses and syllabi were revised to align to the "new" SLOs, as well as state, national, and certification exam standards and competencies. Course resources, content, and key assignments were also updated to assess standards and competencies according to the revised program-level evaluation rubric, the Educational Leadership Program-Level Assessment Rubric (ELPLAR). The program-level curriculum map and standards matrices were adjusted accordingly. Finally, each course added an experiential-learning activity, providing candidates with various opportunities to explore and connect the theoretical information learned in courses to the practical skills, knowledge, and competencies applied in the field.

Further program changes were made to the admission requirements, including a minimum of three years of teaching experience for all candidates. The rationale was based on students having a stronger foundation of educational experiences upon which to build. The state department of education later increased the required number of years of teaching for candidates, as well. The new admission requirements for the certification specialization included: a valid professional certification, a minimum of three years of K–12 full-time teaching experience, a minimal undergraduate GPA of 3.25, the two most recent teaching annual evaluations with effective or higher ratings for instructional practice and performance of students, a letter from a supervisor confirming the applicant has leadership potential, and a letter of intent addressing specific program criteria.

Phase two

The department faculty members recognized the need to monitor candidate progression from admissions to completion and ensure candidate success. Four transition points were established to serve as checkpoints for progress monitoring. These check-

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points allow the faculty and advising staff to recognize candidates needing additional support and remediation. Candidates must successfully meet all the established criteria before graduation from the program, including passing all sections of the state certification exam.

At the departmental level, candidates who do not make adequate progress at each checkpoint are discussed at monthly program-level meetings. An additional layer of support was added via faculty mentors being assigned to each student. All candidates are assigned a faculty mentor, who communicates at the beginning of each semester and as needed during the academic year. To assign students equally to each of the four full-time faculty members, the list of enrolled students was divided into four groups alphabetically by surname. The mentors are available for candidates experiencing academic issues or needing professional advice or guidance. Further, a program remediation plan was developed, allowing candidates to revise and resubmit assignments as needed or requested by the instructor. The program advisor also provides additional support and tracks student progress and notifies faculty members when student remediation is needed or requested.

Phase three

Phase three consisted of utilizing feedback gained through the department's partnerships. A unique aspect of the program is that it is delivered 100 percent online, allowing local, state, and global access to the program. For this reason, the program has a significant number of leadership candidates attending from a large district in the state. In response to partnership development and meeting the needs of diverse districts, the program faculty sought to be identified as a qualified leadership provider for this county, which is a part of the Wallace Foundation (2016) Principal Pipeline initiative. The faculty completed an in-depth program analysis, using the Quality Measures self-study guidelines, to be recognized as an endorsed provider for the district. Through this process, the team highlighted the specific program components, course content, and leadership requirements the candidates experience during the program and received the endorsement.

The rigorous process provided valuable information for identifying strengths and areas for improvement. In response to strengthening the program on a national level, the faculty created opportunities to incorporate the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs) and International Standards for Technology Education (ISTEs) in the program coursework. Program faculty recognized these as areas for improvement and identified gaps in the program. Program courses will incorporate the PSELs, ISTEs, and action research components in the prescribed coursework. To ensure program improvements were implemented promptly, the program faculty developed a plan for implementing the technology standards and research components across the program.

Lastly, the program faculty members relied on data to guide decisions and partnerships with stakeholders in the form of feedback from college-level and departmental advisory committee discussions about the proposed changes. The suggestions from each committee were used to align the program curriculum more closely with the state standards. In addition to the programmatic changes, the departmental advisory committee suggested the program develop a practicum handbook. As a result,

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a practicum handbook was created to outline expectations and guidelines for candidates and school district supervising principals.

Phase four

Aligning performance and program data with curriculum revisions is at the heart of the program accreditation process. The program faculty used this process as a part of addressing the continuous improvement process. Through the self-study process, program faculty identified a gap in the supervision of clinical experiences. As an online program, candidates live across the state, country, and even abroad, adding to the challenge of conducting clinical observations in the field. To address this gap, candidates are required to record themselves participating in leadership responsibilities. This recording is uploaded into an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) and assessed using the ELPLAR. The supervising administrator also assesses the candidate's commitment and the effectiveness of their leadership skills and dispositions. Lastly, the program faculty agreed that feedback from the supervising administrator would provide valuable data for program improvement. A survey instrument was developed to gather supervising administrator feedback and candidate evaluations at the end of the practicum semester. The results are reviewed and considered toward continuous improvement efforts.

Ultimately, program faculty have developed and implemented plans to strengthen the use of research across the program by implementing an action research plan in three courses. Candidates are required to identify a school-based problem utilizing a force field analysis and logic model. In another course, candidates will develop, plan, and implement an intervention or program for the problem identified in the force field analysis and logic model activity. Using data-driven decision-making, the candidates develop and present a plan addressing a school-level issue to a group of stakeholders. Lastly, in the practicum, the candidates evaluate the program's effectiveness after the implementation of their intervention or plan.

Evaluation

The goal of the evaluation process was to conduct an in-depth review of each component in the leadership program. The findings supported the actions implemented for improving program effectiveness. Developing new curricula, improving instructional strategies, and designing benchmarks for the program have increased collaboration among faculty. A strategic data collection and analysis system at the program level was developed to monitor and assess candidate learning and the proficiency of leadership knowledge and skills. Program faculty have used the evaluation process to discover and share new knowledge and ideas about the program and practices. The results have been used to inform programmatic changes.

Strengthening partnerships

A primary goal was to strengthen existing school district partnerships by collaborating with representatives from each district, students, recent graduates, and alumni. Stakeholder feedback was gathered via survey, discussions, and candidate disposition questionnaires, among other methods, as described in the clinical section.

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Partnership A

This master's degree program is offered entirely online, which allows the faculty to serve students without geographic boundaries. Judging by the numbers of candidates enrolled, it has been a very popular choice for busy professionals in the state. Many candidates have mentioned the flexibility of the online learning environment as a reason for selecting the program. Despite the apparent convenience of completing an advanced degree, online students often express their desire to "see" their classmates and the professor. While synchronous sessions are held regularly, they are recorded for those unable to attend live, further benefiting students in different time zones.

The first cohort of online candidates shared that they missed the personalized interaction that a face-to-face course provided. Initially, a hybrid approach was implemented, blending face-to-face and online sessions, but eventually the program was moved entirely online. Over the last several years, there have been many discussions about addressing student concerns about feeling connected. Faculty members recognized a need to promote student engagement, establish a strong instructor presence, and organize and structure courses to allow for more interactions among candidates and instructors (Gray, 2016). While there can be many challenges to teaching and engaging online, the faculty have adapted to the online environment and integrated a variety of high-impact strategies.

One such strategy involved scheduling meet-and-greet events in various cities around the state to reach out to students further from the university's main campus. One professor polled candidates about interest and the response was overwhelming. This event was well-attended and led to a stronger partnership with the school district in which many of the candidates were employed. Some of the benefits of this partnership are described above in phase three.

Partnership B

Four times a year, the department's advisory committee meets with representatives of the four closest school districts. One district representative asked if the faculty would be willing to develop and provide a school leadership simulation and applied skills assessment for aspiring leaders in its Potential School Leaders Program (PSLP). After further discussion and planning, the educational leadership faculty explored the possibility of developing such a program and received permission to proceed with a prototype for the district.

A review of the district's PSLP was undertaken to ensure that the school leadership simulation and applied skills assessment were correlated effectively with the program. Further review determined its development resulted from the district's commitment to provide quality leadership for its schools. The vision for the program was to produce leaders with the knowledge and skills to lead quality schools, continually improve their schools, and increase student achievement. Student achievement was a cornerstone of the program. It was also found that the standards for approval of school principal preparation programs issued by the state department of education were utilized in the development of the program.

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Following the review of the district's program and needs assessment, a plan of action was determined. The guiding principles for the development of the Leadership Assessment Program (LAP) included

- Developing a set of simulations/applied activities for school leaders that are aligned with the priorities articulated by district leadership in collaboration with university faculty.
- Administering and facilitating participation in those activities in full-day seminars with groups of 20–25 leaders and aspiring leaders identified by the district.
- Evaluating the performance of participants using prepared instruments and protocols.
- Collaborating with district leaders to share evaluation results individually with participants.
- Posting seminar meetings with the district to share individual and collective results of the assessments of participants, and discussion of ways to improve future sessions.

The activities developed for the LAP included an in-basket activity, group problem-solving, communication, and individual data analysis activities. The in-basket activity provided simulations to measure a diversity of knowledge, skills, and behaviors related to a school leadership position. Planning, prioritization, decision-making, situation evaluation, data analysis, and the effective use of time were some of the behaviors demonstrated in the in-basket activity.

Performance evaluation instruments were developed based on the skills and behaviors demonstrated in the activity and used by assessors to record observations during the various activities. Based on the evaluation instruments, candidates were assessed as in-depth, sufficient, or developing. The assessors made determinations on the effectiveness of the participant in each skill or behavior and provided additional feedback. These performance evaluation instruments were intended to provide an extensive assessment of the participant's effort and an overall rating.

A significant aspect of the LAP was the individual visit with each applicant and the sharing of the applicant's assessment with the district's leadership. After the evaluation day, the assessors completed the evaluation instruments for the participants and discussed the findings of the day. Within seven to ten days, representatives from the assessment group met individually with participants to review their assessment performance. They discussed areas of strength and areas needing improvement and shared a variety of resources. Representatives from the assessment group also met with district leaders to discuss the performance of participants, provide an overall assessment of each participant, and share suggestions for program-level improvements.

This partnership between the faculty and district provided additional evidence that educational leadership programs need to provide aspiring leaders with more real-world and practical experiences. The district's PSLP provided participants with simulated experiences taken from actual day-to-day activities in K–12 schools by utilizing the LAP developed by the faculty. As a result of the LAP experiences, the faculty decided to incorporate more real-world and authentic activities in the coursework, field experiences, and practicum activities.

Scholarly significance

Leadership preparation programs are responsible for helping candidates connect theoretical knowledge about leadership with the practical skills gained in the field. Therefore, aspiring leaders need to have the opportunity during coursework to develop leadership skills, which are honed during the practicum course. Finally, university faculty must work collaboratively with local school districts to offer continuous support and professional development for developing and veteran instructional leaders in school districts (Anast-May et al. 2010; Geer et al., 2014).

This study offers a model for providing early field experiences, LFC, and mentoring support in collaboration with local school partners. The literature supports the need to redesign and improve principal preparation programs (Campbell & Gross, 2012; Cheney et al., 2010; Dodson, 2015; Johnston & Young; New Leaders, 2011; Schleicher, 2012). It is recommended that universities and school districts share the responsibility of developing selective recruiting processes, mentoring and coaching support, ongoing professional development, and opportunities to support one another via authentic professional networking (Campbell & Gross, 2012; New Leaders, 2011; Schleicher, 2012).

Conclusion

Principal preparation program faculty members are expected to continually improve their curriculum, course content, student learning outcomes and data, and overall stakeholder feedback as part of accreditation requirements and policies. When working collaboratively to make such changes, there tends to be more engagement in the process and ownership of the results (Gray, 2018b). Encouraging open, constructive, and reflective discussions is key to making progress, but they must occur over time (Dodson, 2015; Johnston & Young, 2015). Sharing updates with stakeholders promotes transparency, builds understanding of the goals of the program, encourages feedback, and leads to innovative improvements. This study shares the efforts of one principal preparation program's efforts to meet the needs of students, partner districts, and communities in the hope that other programs might benefit from its clinical approach to continuous improvement and the lessons learned in the process.

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