

School headship in the United States: a situation report

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Our organisation, the National Center on Education and the Economy, was asked some time ago by a number of national foundations to design a new institution to train school heads. In this paper, we share with the reader what we found when we investigated the current state of education and training for headship in the United States and searched for information that could help us address the problems revealed by our analysis of the information we unearthed.

Increasingly, school administration in the United States is perceived to be in a state of growing crisis. Everywhere – in our big cities, the suburbs and our rural areas – it is becoming harder and harder to find qualified people who are willing to apply for jobs as heads (we call them principals) or school superintendents. In some cases, headships are going vacant for months for lack of qualified applicants.

The main causes are not hard to find. The now-vibrant accountability movement has taken hold in state capitols almost everywhere. For the first time, the states have established academic standards students must meet to graduate from secondary school, and have built examinations to determine whether the standards have been met. League tables of school scores are being published in the newspapers. Low-performing schools are being identified. In some cases, when low-performing schools do not improve, their heads are being removed, their faculties dispersed and new schools constituted in the old sites. Heads of poorly-performing schools are being returned to the teaching ranks or dismissed altogether.

All of this is new in the United States. For many heads it is the last straw. In the United States, school heads typically work 60 hours a week, whereas teachers typically work 45. On an hourly basis, many heads make less than many teachers do. As education is increasingly the key to the future, heads are under increasing stress from parents demanding that everything possible, and more, be done for their sons and daughters. And, though our schools are typically much larger than those in the UK, our heads get very little administrative help to cover the added burdens that come with these large faculties and student bodies. It is not unusual for school heads to find more than 40 or even 50 adults in the school reporting directly to them, a span of control that would be simply unacceptable in private industry.

These pressures might be bearable, but what makes them more than many can bear is the fact that heads have very little control over the factors that determine student achievement. With rare exceptions, they cannot control who is hired to work in the school, who is appointed to key positions on the faculty or administration of the school, how the budget is made or spent, what instructional materials will be used, and so on. With rapidly increasing responsibility, and steadily waning authority, they feel as though they are caught in a vice that is steadily tightening. The relatively low pay and the never-ending demands of the job just exacerbate a situation that is very difficult at best.

There is more. We know of not a single school district in the United States that has an effective system for accurately forecasting vacancies in the headship and planning for the filling of those vacancies, for identifying strong candidates for the headship and grooming those candidates for the job, or for helping people with leadership potential to develop that potential by progressing through a series of increasingly responsible leadership and management positions with strong coaching along the way, so as to gain the knowledge, skills and experience needed over time.

And then there is the preparation of school heads. In our country, in most states, one cannot become a head without having attended and completed a programme of post-graduate study in educational administration at a university. These programmes must be approved by the state government.

But, it turns out, that approval is very easy to get. The states do not hold the universities accountable for the quality of their programmes, nor does anyone else. Almost anyone with a baccalaureate degree who wishes to be admitted to these programmes of study will be accepted. Nothing is done to assess whether the people who wish to enter the programmes have the personal qualities needed for headship. The programmes to prepare these people almost universally lack a coherent curriculum. There is almost no relationship between the content of the programme and the actual demands of practice. The curriculum is mostly based on theories that have only the most remote bearing on the practical problems school administrators face, or consist of 'war stories' told by retired school superintendents.

The universities that are home to these programmes have virtually no incentive to change any of these things. They are able to derive a steady supply of ready cash from them just as things are right now, because the cost of the programs is well below the revenues they routinely derive from them. This is because they typically employ adjunct faculty to teach them, people whom they pay for on a course-by-course basis at very low rates.

Pressure is building rapidly to change this picture. The same accountability movement that is producing the pressure on school heads to raise student achievement is also producing alarm that the growing lack of competent people to lead and manage schools will scuttle the whole reform movement. People in key public policy positions are beginning to realise that, unless something is done about the headship, student performance will not improve in the future to the degree that it must.

But putting the problem this way is to change the nature of the challenge. Thought about in this way, the problem will not be solved simply by finding an adequate number of people to fill the vacant slots. We are not looking for an adequate number of people to maintain the status quo. We are looking for people to do what has not been done before: to lead and manage schools so as to produce a great improvement in performance at only a modest increase in cost per student. We are looking for a whole new generation of school heads capable of leading a revolution in instruction, school organisation and – bottom line – student performance.

Much of our analysis hinges on comparisons we made between the preparation of leaders and managers for the headship with the preparation of leaders and managers in other professional fields, including business, the military, medicine, engineering and the ministry.

We looked most closely at business and the military, because, at least in the United States, these are two fields in which the leaders are often admired and sometimes deified. What is it, we asked, that produces such widely admired leaders and managers in these fields? What are the educators of professionals in these fields doing that is so different from what the educators of school administrators are doing?

The answers are fascinating. First, the people we talked with both in our military training organisations and in our best business schools told us that, in both cases, there is a very close relationship between career advancement on the one hand and professional education and training on the other. In the military, promotion boards determine when and whether an officer's career will proceed to the next stage. The decisions are made on the basis of the assignments the officer has had and how well he or she has done in them and, equally, the training that person has had and how well he or she did in that training. If the promotion boards sends the officer up into the higher ranks, that officer qualifies both for the next stage of job assignments and for the next stage of the professional training that goes with it. In this system, the stages of a career line have been thought through and a course of education and training has been designed to go with it. We were told that all officers are rated on the skill with which they actively coach their subordinates through this process and help them acquire the skill and knowledge they need to progress to the next stage. Military executives are not only expected to participate in the system as perpetual students, but, as executives, are expected to be teachers, too, at many points in their careers.

Much the same is true on the business side. There, too, professional education beyond the initial training is closely matched to the demands of the employer, there is a growing tendency to use executives in the firm as teachers and coaches, and the curriculum is based in part on projects that are very real, that emerge from the goals of the firm, and that are an important part of the professional education programme.

This close fit between the professional education and training of the individual and the goals, needs and culture of the employing organisation in business and the military has, as we noted earlier, virtually no parallel in the professional education of educational administrators.

There are other important differences. With respect to pedagogy, for example, the teaching of educational administration is largely based on lectures tied to textbooks and general principles, or on war stories told by retired school administrators. In the education and training of leaders and managers in the military and business, however, it is based on well-developed case materials, simulations and action projects with close feedback – in general, on the problems that emerge from practice. Theory and the structure of the disciplines are not unimportant in these fields, but they are not the stuff from which the curriculum is derived. Rather they are a resource to which one turns to illuminate the solutions to the problems posed by practice.

What is perhaps most interesting for education administration is the direction that professional education in business is now taking.

With respect to the curriculum, emphasis is shifting from a concentration on functional knowledge (things like finance and supervision) to strategic leadership and organisational change. This fits perfectly with the new demands on school leaders, who are now expected, as we noted above, not simply to maintain the organisation in good working order, but to develop strategies for changing the way their school is run to produce much higher achievement without greatly increasing costs.

The content of executive education in business is tending toward ever greater customisation in order to meet the needs of individual firms. In the United States, this, too, makes sense in the context of education, because executive education for heads in a particular district is likely to be much more effective to the extent that it is integrated with the strategies that district has devised to raise student achievement throughout the district.

Executive education in business has for many years been based on real cases, as we noted above. It is moving now, however, toward the use of action learning and strong feedback. This means that the executive development programmes are basing more of their curriculum on real-world projects set by the firm and carried out by the participants employed by that firm, and there

is clear feedback on the those projects from faculty and supervisors as the project progresses. Here, too, it makes sense to us to use a similar technique in the education of school leaders, as a way to make sure that their continuing development reflects the realities of the work they are expected to do.

Next, more and more, the executives who enrol in executive development programmes at business schools are coming in groups from their firms, and members of those groups are expected to function as members of teams rather than as isolated individuals. We think this idea has lots of promise in the field of education, where heads from a particular district can begin to work together in the education school and continue to work with and support each other on the job.

Finally, there is a trend in business toward the use of business executives functioning as teachers in executive development programmes, along with the professoriate. Here, too, this seems to make sense in the American educational context. When top executives of large school districts become part of the group providing continuing education and training to the heads on an ongoing basis, they will see it as an opportunity to connect their goals for the organisation into the daily life of the schools. This will be yet another way to make sure that what is said to the head in training sessions bears some relation to what is expected from the head by the people to whom he or she reports every day.

But the heart of the matter is, and must be, instruction. If the job of the head in the future is mainly to improve student performance, then the head's preoccupation every day must be instruction. The challenge is for the head to engage the entire faculty in the analysis of student performance and the martialling of the school's resources to improve student performance where it is weak. In Britain, as in the United States, this is now a matter of student performance against known clear standards.

Acting on this analysis would require a virtually complete re-conception of the education and training of school heads in the United States. We will leave it to the reader to determine whether that is true for Britain as well.