

Preparing Principals to Lead in Today's Varied Educational Settings

Doug Dwain Thomas – University of Central Missouri

Bryan McDonald – University of Central Missouri

Henry Russell – University of Central Missouri

Sandy Hutchinson – University of Central Missouri

Abstract

The role of school leaders varies greatly from community to community, school to school. The demands on these positions are impacted by student demographics, organizational variables, and community traditions. Principal preparation programs must prepare aspiring school leaders for these unique demands, often serving candidates from urban, suburban, and rural communities. This article examines three different cohort-based preparation programs specifically geared toward addressing the unique leadership challenges associated with urban, suburban, and rural schools. The authors found that the cohort model, modified for the different demographics, provided not only the required skill set and knowledge base, but the flexibility and support needed for the candidates, as well. Modified curriculum and built in accommodations supported the aspiring school leaders preparing to work in suburban, rural, or urban school settings, each characterized by its own unique sources of issues and challenges.

Preparing Principals to Lead in Today's Varied Educational Settings

Currently, there is great interest in how quality leadership preparation is related to leadership practice and improved teacher outcomes (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). In this paper, the authors provide an account of the development and delivery of cohort-based principal preparation programs specifically developed to serve the unique needs of rural, suburban, and urban schools. The first cohort program was delivered in 2002 in partnership with 14 suburban school districts outside of Kansas City. Working from this model, revisions were implemented to serve educators from rural districts in central Missouri. Lastly, the cohort model was implemented to provide leadership preparation programs geared toward meeting the unique demands of urban education.

When considering the principal preparation programs, it is important to note the substantive changes that have occurred over the past years that have had an effect on the responsibilities of the principal. Society is becoming increasingly diverse and the traditional two-parent family of the 1960s, in which the father worked and the mother stayed at home with the children, is more the exception than the norm. Schools operate today notably differently from the ones of just a few years ago. The global economy is transforming the 21st century workplace for which schools must prepare students. Technologies are advancing faster than ever (NPBEA, 2015). Poverty is increasing, indexes of physical, mental, and moral well-being are declining, and the stock of social capital is decreasing. "Without question, such changes are creating myriad challenges for educational leaders" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 1).

In addition to the changes in society, there are increasing demands that all schools educate all students to a high level. Accreditation of schools is largely based on student performance on state-mandated assessments. In Missouri, schools that do not meet the state standards may be declared academically deficient, with the possibility that the state may take over operation of the schools. As a result, school districts are looking for administrators who can come into a school and establish a learning community in which students and staff members focus on teaching and learning.

As a result of the changes in society and the increased accountability of the schools, the role of the principal has changed from that of a building manager to that of an instructional leader. Principals no longer have the luxury of maintaining the status quo in their buildings. They must continually analyze their programs and procedures and make adjustments that will improve conditions for students and staff (Wallace Foundation, 2013). As stated by Tirozzi (2001), the principals of tomorrow's schools will not be recognized and rewarded solely for their managerial skills; they will be recognized as leaders of curricular change, innovative and diversified instructional strategies, data-driven decision making, and the implementation of accountability models for students and staff. For administrative candidates to meet the challenges of the schools of today, the administration preparation program must have a strong focus on instructional leadership.

University of Central Missouri

University of Central Missouri (UCM) was founded in 1871 as a normal school. Housed in Warrensburg, Missouri, UCM is located approximately 40 miles from the metropolitan Kansas City area. As of Fall 2016, 13,099 students were enrolled at UCM, including 9,786 undergraduate and 4,202 graduate students (University of Central Missouri, 2016). UCM's motto, *Learning to a Greater Degree*, helps define the mission of UCM. Four pillars support the mission: Engaged Learning, Future-focused Academics, Worldly Perspective, and Culture of Service (UCM, 2016). Classes are offered on the Warrensburg campus and through the Office of

Extended Campus online, ITV, off campus, and at Missouri Innovation Center (MIC) in Lee's Summit, MO, a 45 minute drive from the main campus.

UCM has a long history of preparing teachers and administrators for Missouri schools and is one of the largest educator preparation programs in the state. UCM has been accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) since 1954. Graduate programs include MSE, MAT and EdS degrees in educational leadership, library media specialist, Career & Technical Education (CTE) Leadership, curriculum and instruction, reading specialist, math specialist, special education, special education director, and literacy, as well as other areas. The UCM School Administration program is nationally recognized by the Education Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC).

The UCM principal preparation program is state-approved, and aligned with both national standards (ELCC) and the Missouri Standards for Professional Educators (MOSPE). State requirements also set the curriculum and practicum requirements of 300 hours of administrative observations and/or activities.

In addition to addressing the national and state standards, the principal preparation programs are also geared toward preparing candidates for the high-stakes certification tests required by the state. Missouri now requires two assessments for principal certification. One is a series of three performance tasks that focus on (a) identifying a problem, researching the issue, and developing a plan to address the problem; (b) creating a professional development plan for staff members, implementing the plan, and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan; and (c) facilitating a group toward solution of a problem. The content assessment consists of 80 multiple-choice questions and two constructed response items. The focus of this "content" assessment is centered on the Missouri Leader Standards. A student must receive a passing grade on this test, as well as the performance tasks to receive certification.

Cohort Models

Collaborative Principal Preparation Program. The initial effort to begin a cohort-based preparation program began by contacting several Kansas City area suburban superintendents regarding a leadership development effort for potential leaders in their districts. Several of the faculty members from University of Central Missouri's Educational Leadership department met with six Kansas City suburban superintendents on several occasions throughout the fall of 2001 to discuss this new initiative. In January 2002, the superintendents of the six districts endorsed the program. Initial efforts also secured an implementation grant from the Wallace Foundation through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) has added additional districts over the years and now includes 14 Kansas City area school districts.

In developing the (CPPP), consideration has been given to the areas of concern regarding traditional preparation programs and the growing need for quality administrative candidates to fill projected vacancies. The program incorporated district-selected educators, a cohort model of instruction, mentoring, embedded practicum experiences, and high-quality professional development. District liaisons (usually assistant superintendents either primarily responsible for human resources or academic achievement) are appointed by their superintendents to work with the coordinator of the CPPP to review the program and to offer insights and recommendations on the curriculum. The school and university personnel work together toward the joint goal of providing a program that enables graduates to enter into administration in their districts prepared to lead. These administrators also provide district approval for a candidate's participation in the

program. Additionally, the district liaisons work with the program coordinator to assure that each candidate is paired with an appropriate building-level school leader who will serve as the candidate’s mentor throughout the program.

Teaching responsibilities are primarily the responsibility of full-time faculty, but a few courses are taught by current, district-level leaders from CPPP school districts. All courses are offered at the Lee’s Summit, Missouri campus to allow students to complete their program close to their home districts. Students enter, progress through, and complete the program as a cohort over the course of two years (six consecutive semesters). For the last decade, there have been enough students to have an elementary and a secondary cohort move through concurrently.

Since its inception in 2002, 425 students have participated in the Collaborative Principal Preparation Program. Since 2009, 216 students have entered the program (not counting those currently in the program) and 214 of these individuals graduated. There are currently 136 CPPP graduates serving in leadership positions. Table 1 lists the cohorts, number of participating school districts, and number of individuals in each cohort.

Year	Number of Districts Involved	Number of participants
2002 - 04	6	17
2004 - 06	7	16
2005 - 07	6	16
2006 - 08	8	30
2007 - 09	14	31
2008 - 10	14	34
2009 - 11	14	30
2010 - 12	15	34
2011 - 13	15	25
2012 - 14	14	27
2013 - 15	14	34
2014 - 16	14	34
2015 – 17	14	32
2016 – 18*	14	27
2017 – 19*	14	38
Total		425

*not yet complete

Many students who graduate from the CPPP may not step immediately into a leadership role. They may be still perfecting their skills in the classroom and are enjoying that challenge or do not feel like personally this is the best time for them to move into a position that requires a greater time commitment or a longer contract. However, those who are ready to increase their responsibilities have had phenomenal success in being selected as instructional coaches or administrators. The close working relationships with cooperating school districts may be part of the reason. The CPPP graduates were approved by their district to participate initially; they were assigned mentors selected by their district; and their respective districts had input into the type of experiences they would have at UCM. The students, therefore, have had a customized program that positions them to lead in their district, thus making them better prepared candidates.

Rural Leadership. Working from the successful implementation of the CPPP, UCM faculty members implemented a similar project, Rural Leadership Preparation Program (RLPP), with area rural schools. The project included planning sessions with area school leaders and orientation sessions with prospective students. These efforts led to the initial establishment of two cohorts of rural educators.

Unlike the CPPP, the RLPP included both district-selected candidates and self-selected candidates. Administrators from the rural districts were asked to identify staff members within their schools who had the potential to become educational leaders. Each district developed its own procedure for identifying candidates for the program and encouraging participation in the RLPP. The primary focus of the degree program was on the preparation of school leaders, including teacher leaders, working in rural school districts. Emphasis in all the coursework and job-embedded activities revolved around rural education issues and needs.

The initial cohorts consisted of 11 students at each site. The Butler cohort included eight students from Butler schools, and three additional students from other area schools. The Clinton cohort included five students from Clinton, and six students from four other districts. Classes were held at the rural school sites in 2007 to 2009. Of these 22 students, six have assumed leadership positions. A similar cohort of 19 students is currently in progress at Marshall, MO, and will complete the program in May 2018.

Urban Leadership. The University of Central Missouri, in partnership with its public charter schools in Kansas City, has completed two cohorts of students participating in its urban leadership preparation program. This preparation program was geared specifically for educators working in UCM-sponsored charter schools. The urban leadership program was developed to better prepare future school leaders for the unique demands of urban education. All coursework and activities are relevant and meaningful to the leadership and management of urban schools. "Job-embedded" activities are incorporated throughout the coursework to give students the opportunity to work with "real world" situations and issues. Additionally, only instructors with urban experience and expertise have been selected to teach the courses, including successful practitioners from urban districts.

The cohort model provides flexibility and support for the students. Scheduling and advisement are built into the model, bringing these services to the students. Additionally, students work with faculty members to develop a schedule and delivery model for upcoming courses. The majority of the courses have been in the traditional format, but have also included hybrid and online courses. These accommodations help support graduate students working in urban school settings, often characterized by high stress and demanding time restraints.

The urban program was made possible by a number of partnerships between the charter schools, the College of Education, the Graduate School, and the Midwest Center for Charter Schools and Urban Education. School leaders were vital in the recruitment and selection of students for the program. Additionally, selected school leaders have participated as "guest lecturers" to share their expertise and experiences. Students also receive financial support. The Midwest Center for Charter Schools and Urban Education provided "tuition" for four of the required classes, basically "reinvesting" a portion of the funds generated by charter school enrollment back to the schools. These classes are designed to support the school improvement mandates embedded in the charter school concept.

Fourteen students, all urban educators working at UCM-sponsored charter schools, completed the program in December 2012. Since that time, five of these 14 have assumed

leadership roles within their schools. A second cohort of 13 charter school educators completed the program December 2015, with one of these students moving into a leadership role.

Key Aspects of UCM's Cohort Programs

Recruitment. The cohort-based school leader preparation programs addressed the lack of quality candidates in the schools by having the school district administration identify potential leaders, allowing the school districts to tap a talent pool within each of their districts. According to the Wallace Foundation (2012), the process used for candidate training should be selective to create a more capable and diverse group of future principals. Staff members who receive training and additional responsibility are able to determine if they are suited for administrative positions. It also allows the principal to observe the candidates to determine if they are suited for leadership positions. In addition, it allows the teachers to practice their new skills in a safe, secure environment with the support of the current administration.

The benefits of “grow your own” programs have been noted for some time. Peterson and Kelly (2001) reviewed the findings of the Grow Your Own Principals program in Madison, Wisconsin, which was a cooperative effort between the school district and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The district found that graduates from the Grow Your Own program had a good understanding of the district operations and were able to transition easily into administrative positions within the district. In 2011, six districts launched the Principal Pipeline Initiative with the hope to establish a consistent “pipeline” of effective school leaders. Initial results are positive. Additional research is being conducted by tracking school leaders who emerged from the program (Wallace Foundation, 2015).

Collaboration. To enhance the collaboration between the school districts and UCM an instructional leadership team was established for each of the cohort programs. The instructional leadership team consists of faculty members from UCM and district administrators from participating districts. The team met on a regular basis through the programs. The team met at the beginning of each semester to review the program of study, to get an update on the progress of the program from the instructors, and to provide feedback to the UCM staff on their perceptions of the program.

Cohort Composition. The students all began their program at the same time and worked and grew together as a learning community throughout the six semesters of the programs. According to Norris, Barnett, Basom, and Yorkers (1996), cohorts that operate as true groups are characterized by four important qualities: interaction, purpose, interdependence, and individual growth. The cohort structure allows students the opportunity to learn from each other, develop friendships that will support them throughout the program, and provide them a professional network that will be advantageous to them throughout their professional careers.

Program Structure. The delivery of the programs included a variety of formats. The majority of the courses, two each semester, were delivered at the rural school site. The CPPP suburban cohorts incorporate two courses taught in one evening (5:00 and 7:30), the RLPP classes were delivered in eight week blocks, one course at a time; and the urban cohort included a combination of 8-week courses and online delivery. The Marshall cohort classes were primarily delivered face to face, with a few online courses.

Faculty Participation. The composition of the faculty in educational programs is also a topic of discussion in the literature. In an AASA survey, the top action step universities could take to improve their principal preparation programs was to have most or all of their courses taught by current or former effective principals (Wallace Foundation, 2016). The educational leadership professors at UCM have extensive backgrounds in public schools, allowing them to

address practical experience along with theory. While the use of adjunct professors has some potential benefits, it was the goal of the UCM faculty that the cohorts be primarily instructed by regular faculty members. Of the seven faculty members in the Educational Leadership program, all have taught classes for one or more of the cohort groups.

Faculty participation is the “glue” that connects the students’ experiences and learning obtained during specific courses of the program. Without having full-time faculty members who are aware of the student experiences from beginning to end, much of the benefit of the cohort model would be minimized. With full-time faculty members working with the students at multiple points during the program of study, learning experiences can be referred to, built upon, and utilized throughout the preparation program. By being aware of the common experiences of the students, faculty can connect the different courses and learning experiences in a cohesive and meaningful manner.

Real World Application. An AACTE survey identified strong clinical experiences as the top essential element in preparing strong principals (Wallace Foundation, 2016). The study also noted barriers universities face in achieving this key element. These include identifying high-quality mentors, developing partnerships with districts, as well as time and financial restraints. In most cases, the candidate is a full-time educator and working to complete the required internship hours.

The UCM School Administration degree program has an internship component in which students work with mentors within their district for two semesters. This internship experience occurs toward the end of their program and has been a very strong component of the program. It is the intent of the programs to expand upon this type of experience so students can incorporate components of the internship throughout their course work. Another responsibility of the instructional leadership team is to recommend ways in which students can experience job-embedded learning throughout the six semesters of their program.

Administrators, mentors, and students noted many advantages for incorporating job-embedded activities into the administrator preparation program. Among the advantages mentioned were: practical experiences, which supported the theory discussed in classes, chances for employment were greater because administrators were able to directly observe and work with administrative candidates, it broadened the student’s understanding of the principal’s role, and students would seek administrative positions sooner than originally planned as a result of participating in the programs.

Looking Ahead

Missouri’s educational landscape has been negatively impacted by the recent economic recession and subsequent years of lower state revenues for both PK-12 and higher education. Most districts, as well as institutions of higher education, have cut programs, increased class sizes, and reduced their professional development budgets. A pattern that particularly impacted leadership programs has been the reduction of many intermediate positions such as instructional coaches and administrative interns, often providing the first step into future leadership positions.

Missouri’s education policy trends have also been influenced by a reform ideology. State legislation, influenced by recommendations from their respective state Boards of Education, has caused constant changes in academic standards for students in PK-12 schools over the past several years. There has been controversy over state standards for education, as well as standards for the preparation of educators.

Missouri has also witnessed recent trends to make the evaluation of individual educators and school systems a priority within their public education accountability systems. Districts and

individual school sites are evaluated with an Annual Performance Report, a numerical system of rating and ranking public schools in Missouri. Missouri has also recently implemented a new system for evaluating teachers and principals.

These reform measures have not been limited to PK-12 schools. Missouri's educator preparation programs are now being held accountable by the State Board of Education via a published Annual Performance Report (APR). The APR includes program admission-completion rates, student grade point averages, pass rates on the state assessments for certification, and first year principal survey results (DESE, 2016). As institutions react to these new mandates, a perceived value to the cohort model is the ability to coordinate and reinforce efforts to improve these data sets. For example, the CPPP has incorporated the State's Performance Tasks within a number of its courses, providing students with a system of seamless support as students progress from one semester to the next, culminating with the submission of the tasks during the students' internship course. While the initial results are not yet public, CPPP students have reported successful pass rates on both the performance tasks and the new content test.

This paper describes some of the practices being employed with respect to the UCM cohort programs. Although leading in today's schools is more difficult than ever because of a range of issues including societal needs, high-takes testing, and decreased funding for education; it is interesting to note that many of the significant challenges continue to be the same through the years and across the different cohort programs. Much of what has been found in other cohort studies has been reinforced within the UCM principal preparation cohorts, but more remains to be learned to know how to design and deliver a model for prospective school leaders that serves the diverse needs of school leaders in rural, suburban, and urban schools.

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