

# **WHY A SYSTEM OF ADVANCED CERTIFICATION FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED & SUPPORTED**

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However one judges the current performance of our schools against past performance, or considers the degree to which there have been noticeable improvements at the margins as the result of 20 years of reform initiatives, there remains the uncomfortable fact that the kind and quality of education currently available is inadequate for many too many children. When such expectations come up against a system where the support and incentives for change are few and the ability to measure performance is modest at best, the prospects for the kind of marked shifts in teaching and learning that the times demand seem ever more elusive.

## **The Importance of Quality Leadership**

Leadership functions in schools and districts are strongly though indirectly related to the core functions of the schooling, teaching and learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Reviews of research on school improvement and reform confirm that leadership of improving schools positively influences: the focus on teaching and learning, an information-rich environment, school culture, the development of a learning community, continuous professional development, parental involvement, and external support and resources (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). These findings are consistent with findings from the Effective Schools literature (Rosenholtz, 1985) and other more recent leadership studies conducted in high poverty urban schools (Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2008).

To date, the policy community has correctly placed substantial emphasis on what is to be taught, how we teach, and who teaches. This is important, but by itself insufficient. It is insufficient, in large measure, due to three challenges facing educational leadership. First, the main workforce of the schools, teachers, have for

the most part entered their profession with the notion that once they have been granted a license to teach by the state they will be accorded certain prerogatives and function as independent experts able to decide what is best for their students. They are assigned courses and classes to teach on their own, further reinforcing their roles as independent practitioners. And, their compensation is generally not linked to either their individual or the institution's performance. This is a tremendous challenge for leadership. Another is parents, the schools' customers, who are traditionally quite conservative when it comes to the education of their own children and naturally suspicious of initiatives to move schooling in directions that are at variance from what they experienced in their own youth. A third challenge is that school leaders have responsibility without a commensurate degree of authority for budgets, personnel or curricular objectives.

This list could be extended further, but just as it stands, it suggests why a premium needs to be placed on attracting and holding in positions of leadership knowledgeable, skilled and committed individuals. This is especially so today given the student learning challenges facing most schools and the fishbowl like existence that distinguishes life as a school leader from the life of leaders in most American workplaces. Consequently, transforming schools into the productive educational institutions they need to be is a daunting task, and one unlikely to occur without inspired and intelligent leadership.

## **Thinking Afresh About Leadership Development**

In thinking through how to address these matters, the career paths school leaders take and the manner in which they are educated and developed deserve serious attention. Most school leaders come out of the ranks of teachers and gain masters degrees or take

other course work on their way to acquiring an administrative license from the state. Recent efforts to redefine what first time administrators should know and be able to do have resulted in the ISLLC Standards. Influenced by the growing pressure on school systems to improve student learning, this work gives greater emphasis to the instructional leadership responsibilities of school administrators. Pushed by ISLLC's actions and the broad influence of the accountability movement, this aspect of leadership is now a front burner issue as administrator preparation programs are restructured.

Unfortunately, once in possession of a license administrators typically find themselves at the end of any organized effort to build their capacity to serve as education leaders. Unlike other professions, where there are systematic and continuous initiatives to grow and develop, education makes no such careful investment of resources in its future leaders.

This same dilemma has until recently been characteristic of teaching as well. The system has placed nearly all of its chips on assuring the quality of beginning teachers and hardly any on growing novice teachers into highly accomplished practitioners. The advent of National Board Certification (NBC) for teachers has begun to change this equation fundamentally. The profession has established high and rigorous standards for exemplary practice and built a valid, reliable and fair system for recognizing accomplished teachers. States and localities have responded by recognizing the value represented by a certificate issued by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). In 30-plus states there are now financial incentives to seek and achieve NBC and often the promise of new roles and responsibilities as well. These incentives include full payment of the cost of the certification process, significant one-time and permanent salary increases, and access to lead teacher positions that offer greater responsibility, autonomy, status and compensation.

### **The Benefits of National Board Certification for Educational Leaders**

Given the current state of school administration, a similar initiative to develop a system of advanced professional certification could pay dividends many times over. The benefits of developing such a system would fall along the following lines:

1) **Standards** – For the first time the profession would come together to formulate not what beginning practitioners need to know and be able to do, but to establish a set of professional norms for exemplary practitioners. Codifying such a professional consensus around best practice is the mark of a genuine profession, for only when a profession can articulate what expertise characterizes a full-fledged member of its field can it claim, in fact, to be a profession.

2) **Professional Education** –Advanced standards means that for the first time there will be a set of high standards to guide all phases of the education and training of administrators, from initial preparation, through licensure and initial practice, and then on to advanced practice. This will ensure that a clear message about educational leadership is available to future and current administrators, to those who are called on to evaluate their practice, and to those who hold the responsibility for educating administrators to the highest level.

3) **Recognition of Excellence in Education Leadership** –Administrators who have developed over time into first-rate practitioners deserve, like teachers, to be recognized by their peers for their accomplishments. Affirmation of the quality of their work would create an incentive for excellence and professional growth where few such incentives currently exist. It would also establish a vehicle for school systems to encourage such growth by tying improved compensation and greater responsibilities to board certification. At present, higher status and compensation are associated with directing larger institutions and higher level schools. As a result, many elementary and middle school have lost effective principals to high schools. Recognizing and rewarding exemplary practitioners should encourage strong administrators to stay longer at places where they are making a difference, a change that might also make school leadership itself a more attractive career choice for talented educators.

4) **Quality Assurance** – As school systems seek to develop and put in place highly effective administrators who can lead the transformation of schools and school districts, the existence of a valid, reliable and fair system to identify such administrators would be of substantial assistance in selecting new leaders and placing highly competent administrators in those settings most in need of

renewal and improvement. It would also serve as a legitimate basis to offer better compensation to those with demonstrated expertise and thereby broaden the pool of candidates for the most critical positions.

#### 5) **Mobility and the Administrator Labor Market –**

While advanced certification of administrators by itself will not solve the problem of state retirement systems that tend to pin down able administrators, it could contribute to a general opening of the labor market for such professionals by introducing an objective qualitative dimension to personnel evaluations and hiring decisions that is largely absent today. This would be a healthy development for both employers and employees. It might also serve to jump-start a serious and needed conversation about pension portability.

#### **Policy Implications**

Coupled with the fact that high quality leaders are perceived to be in relatively short supply in a growing number of school systems (Jacobson, 2005), we need to incorporate what we know about the passion, commitments and practices of successful leaders into principal preparation and leadership development. Through joint effort and informed action, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is working with educational stakeholders like the NPBEA to develop a national board certification for educational leaders. This development is significant and worthy of support. We recommend thoughtful policy action at the district, state and national levels. The development of advanced board certification for leaders, particularly when combined with high quality leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2007), will enable districts and states to improve the quality and effectiveness of school leaders for the schools (and students) who need effective leadership most.

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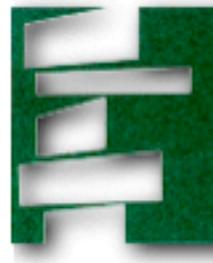
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