

“The Employability of Site Administrators Who Obtained Administrative Certification by Examination”

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ABSTRACT

Alternative pathways for certifying school administrators are readily available in many states. Notable models include internships, provisional licensing based on prior experience, and testing. The rationale for implementing these systems include: (1) a shortage of certified personnel to fill vacant positions, (2) a perceived lack of quality candidates, (3) dissatisfaction with institutions of higher education and programs of preparation, and (4) a perception of unfairness toward individuals who sincerely wish to become professional educators but face real or imagined roadblocks to licensure. Philosophical differences aside, these options are law in most states.

Of greater interest to the author, however, is the optional examination route. California candidates are able to bypass the completion of a formal preparation program by obtaining a passing score on the School Leadership Licensure Assessment (SLLA). Some school leaders have questioned the credibility of a test as the sole determinate of a person’s ability to serve as a school administrator. As such, are these individuals viable applicants for administrative positions? Are California superintendents willing to hire principals who have obtained an administrative credential by examination and, if so, under what conditions?

The Study

The intent of this study is to analyze the perceptions of superintendents in California regarding candidates who received their initial certification via passage of the SLLA. The narrative begins with a review of the literature regarding: (1) school administrator shortages, (2) the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC)

Standards, (3) alternative licensure systems, (4) administrator testing, and (5) the SLLA route to certification in California. Next, the research survey will be described. Finally, the findings will be analyzed and recommendations will be made for the benefit of policy-makers and potential administrative candidates.

Related Literature

The literature is replete with discourse regarding optional pathways to school leadership licensure. These models are implemented to meet a shortage of school leaders at the building and district levels.

Certain critical positions are more difficult to fill than others. For example, superintendencies are becoming less attractive to subordinate administrators who may be considering promotion. Unrealistic political demands and school board dysfunction have disenfranchised many highly qualified candidates from seeking this office (Pounder, Galvin & Shepherd, 2003). High school principalships are also viewed as highly stressful, with excessive time demands, overwhelming public expectations, unreachable state accountability mandates, and increased organizational complexity (Tirozzi, 2001).

Beem (2002) noted that many licensed individuals exist in the education labor pool, but are simply not choosing to enter school administration. For instance, 8,000 persons in Missouri hold the basic principal certification, but only 2,200 are actually serving in building-level positions. Jensen (2002) conducted a statewide survey of administrative credential holders in California and found that over one-third of program graduates never activated their certificates. Of the working group, one-third eventually returned to the classroom or left education altogether. Rayfield and Diamantes (2004) concluded that the work of the principal was complex and overwhelming, resulting in an attitude of reluctance among teachers to seek and apply for positions. Working conditions, pay, hours, and political pressures were cited most often as reasons to avoid administrative positions.

Nevertheless, real long-term shortages do exist in the profession. The number of school administrators needed by the nation's schools is expected to increase 10 to 20 percent by 2008 (Copland, 2001). In addition, 40 percent of current site administrators will reach retirement age by 2009. This prediction is exacerbated in large, urban districts (Groff, 2003).

Traditional forms of administrator preparation have been assailed in the literature. Critics have accused institutions of higher education of failing to recruit quality candidates, lacking high standards of performance, and offering irrelevant program content and instructors who are disconnected from actual practice. School leaders are demanding that universities offer job-embedded experiences that provide students with the opportunity to learn the complex skills of administration in a real-time practicum format (Murphy, 2001).

Shen, Cooley, Ruhl-Smith and Seiser (1999) analyzed surveys completed by the graduates of educational administration programs at 29 colleges and universities. The

authors found that 89% of the candidates rated their training as “A” or “B.” Nevertheless, graduates expressed a strong belief that most educators could be reasonably good administrators without having to complete a leadership preparation program. This notion suggested that learning by doing was the preferred model of preparation. While students valued a broad knowledge base, the traditional university-based program was viewed as only one source of pre-service qualification.

In an effort to streamline the licensure of administrators and normalize the preparation of candidates nationally, a common set of program standards was developed and adopted by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) (1996). These standards delineate what school leaders should be able to do, such as: (1) facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community; (2) advocate, nurture, and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; (3) ensure management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; (4) collaborate with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources; (5) act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and (6) understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. An almost identical set of standards for school leaders was adopted in California. All certification and professional growth programs must be aligned with the California Professional Standards for School Leaders (CPSSL) (California Department of Education, 2001). In addition, universities are aligning coursework and practicum experiences with the ISLLC Standards to ensure that students are gaining a deeper understanding of the centrality of learning and teaching to school improvement and student success (Murphy, 2001).

Common alternative licensing options include provisional certification and internship/mentoring arrangements. For example, minimally-qualified individuals located in rural areas of Montana can obtain a three-year provisional certificate by enrolling as an intern in a university-based program, receiving on-site mentoring guidance, and attending brief, intense courses during the summer (Erickson, 2001). California candidates can serve as site administrators by concurrently enrolling in a university-based program and receiving intense mentoring support. The intern certificate is valid for two years—allowing candidates the time to complete all credential requirements for the preliminary certificate (CCTC, 2005).

Several unique alternate paths have surfaced in recent years. Missouri is field-testing a portfolio assessment for school principals (Beem, 2002). Texas, Vermont and New Jersey allow school districts to employ school administrators who hold master’s degrees in management and public policy. Administrator candidates in Philadelphia complete an internship, research project and performance-based assessment prior to licensure. Some states allow teachers with leadership experience and master’s degrees in areas other than administration to become certified (Groff, 2003).

Some districts are hiring school leaders from outside of education. These individuals have diverse backgrounds and are believed to have unique skills that make administrative certification superfluous. A superintendent in California without an education background can be legally authorized to serve as the top school administrator

by action of the local governing board (Legislative Counsel, 2005). Michigan allows school districts to set their own standards for administrators and, accordingly, does not issue administrative credentials (Pipho, 1993).

Examination options exist for aspiring administrators. However, testing is generally the culminating activity following the completion of a university-based preparation program. The School Leadership Licensure Assessment (SLLA) is administered by 11 (of 12) states as an exit examination to verify the knowledge competence of program graduates (CCTC, 2003a).

Only one state—California—has adopted the SLLA as a stand-alone replacement for a formal preparation program. California Governor Gray Davis signed legislation allowing principal candidates to challenge the state's academic certification requirements for administrators. The bill's sponsor stated that the test would eliminate bureaucratic hurdles that discouraged otherwise skilled individuals from becoming administrators (Groff, 2003).

The SLLA is published by Educational Testing Service (2005) and consists of constructed-response questions. The test purports to measure the knowledge believed necessary for competent professional practice by novice principals. The content is aligned to the ISLLC Standards and is not state-specific. The six-hour assessment is divided into four sections, which include situational dilemmas, case studies, and document analyses. The SLLA is scored on a scale of 100 to 200. Eight (of 12) states have adopted passing scores ranging from 154 to 161. The passing score in California is 173 (CCTC, 2003a). The publisher provides preparation materials, including sample study questions that are similar to the actual testing format. Weekend prep-sessions sponsored by private providers are frequently offered prior to the actual examination.

Individuals qualifying for the preliminary administrative credential in California via the SLLA examination option must verify: (1) possession of an appropriate California base credential, (2) three years of successful certificated experience, (3) passage of the CBEST, (4) passage of the SLLA, and (5) an offer of employment in an administrative position (CCTC, 2003b). Candidates are not required to complete any further training or formalized program of preparation in order to serve as a California administrator for the first five years of employment.

The author suggests that an important measure of the effectiveness of any licensing option is the employability of the credential holders. Therefore, the preceding discourse leads the author to posit the primary research question of this study: Are California superintendents willing to hire principals who have obtained an administrative credential by examination and, if so, under what conditions?

Methodology

The research design was quantitative, using survey research methods to collect data. An online survey was developed by the author and field-tested by obtaining input from practicing administrators serving in public schools in the local area. The survey

consisted of demographic information (Part I), belief statements regarding the conditions by which applicants, who were qualified by examination, would be acceptable for employment (Part II), and open-ended responses (Part III).

Part I requested information regarding the respondents' years of service as a superintendent, credentials, and university degrees. In addition, data regarding district enrollment, type, and location were solicited. Part II consisted of ten statements. Respondents were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point interval scale, indicating their level of agreement. Finally, Part III requested additional written comments.

Using survey research techniques, potential respondents were randomly selected from the California Public School Directory (CDE, 2004). Online e-mail messages were forwarded to California superintendents. The messages requested their participation in the research study and included a hyperlink to the online survey. After completing the online survey, respondents clicked on the submit button at the bottom of the survey to complete the process. All data were gathered during a ten-day time period. One hundred and five superintendents submitted completed surveys.

Data from Part I of the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies were converted to percentages to provide a common base for comparison.

Mean responses from Part II were calculated and ranked in descending order to illustrate the strongest perceptions. Data were also statistically analyzed using the Chi-Square Goodness of Fit to determine if obtained responses differed significantly from an equal distribution of responses, thereby demonstrating a strong preference for a given statement or condition. Significance was determined when the obtained F value was equal to or greater than the critical F value of 9.49 ($\alpha=.05$, $df=4$).

Finally, open-ended remarks in Part III were analyzed. Respondents' comments were cross-tabulated and notable strands were identified and discussed in the narrative.

Findings

Demographic information was requested in Part I. Two-thirds of the respondents were superintendents with ten or fewer years of experience. The vast majority of the respondents were fully-certified and held advanced degrees. Fifty-two percent of the superintendents worked in elementary (K-8) districts, while 38% served in unified (K-12) districts. The majority of the respondents were employed in districts with enrollment between 1,001 and 10,000 students. Generally, respondents' districts were located in either suburban or rural areas. (See Table 1)

The final question asked the respondents if they would recommend the employment of a site administrator who obtained a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential by examination. Respondents who selected "Yes" were directed to Part II (Perceptions Regarding the Employment of a Site Administrator Holding a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential by Examination) and were asked to rate ten statements. Respondents who selected "No" were directed to Part III (Open-Ended

Responses). Superintendents' responses were almost evenly divided between "Yes" (52%) and "No" (48%).

Table 1
Demographic data (N=105)

# Years Served as Superintendent	1-5 (37%)	6-10 (29%)	11-19 (26%)	20+ (8%)
Type of District	Elementary (49%)	High (11%)	Unified (38%)	Other (2%)
Location of District	Urban (8%)	Suburban (44%)	Rural (47%)	Isolated (1%)
Student Enrollment (District)	<250 (1%)	251-1,000 (19%)	1,001-10,000 (64%)	10,000> (16%)
Administrative Credential Held	None (0%)	Intern (0%)	Preliminary (3%)	Professional (97%)
Highest Degree Earned	Bachelor's (3%)	Master's (50%)	Ed Specialist (1%)	Doctorate (46%)
Would you recommend employment of a site administrator who obtained an administrative credential by examination?	Yes (52%)	No (48%)		

Part II of the survey asked respondents to rate ten statements regarding their level of agreement on a 5-point interval scale (5=Complete Agreement; 4=Strong Agreement, 3=Average Agreement; 2=Weak Agreement; 1=Do Not Agree). Mean responses were calculated and ranked in descending order from the highest to the lowest level of agreement. The distribution of responses on seven (of ten) statements was found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$), demonstrating a strong preference for a given statement.

The top three mean responses indicated that candidates who qualified by examination would be considered for employment: (1) in conjunction with a formal mentoring and support program [$M=3.49$], (2) if the individual had prior education experience [$M=3.43$], and (3) if the individual had served in a quasi-administrative role [$M=3.37$]. These responses were statistically significant ($p < .05$), indicating a strong preference for these specific statements.

Conversely, the following responses were less relevant to the employment decision: (1) if the individual held an advanced degree [$M=2.60$], (2) if the individual was a district employee [$M=2.60$], (3) if the individual had prior management experience outside of education [$M=2.25$], and (4) during periods of administrator shortage [$M=2.17$]. These responses were the lowest-ranked and were statistically significant ($p < .05$), indicating a strong preference for these specific statements.

Table 2
 Respondents' perceptions (N=68)

Statement:	Mean
"I would recommend the employment of a site administrator who obtained an administrative credential <u>by examination</u> ..."	
"...in conjunction with a formal mentoring and support program."	3.49*
"...if the individual had prior education experience (out-of-state, private school)."	3.43*
"...if the individual served in a quasi-administrative role (assistant-to-principal)."	3.37*
"...without reservation, as long as the candidate was otherwise qualified."	2.98
"...the individual was a recognized expert in his/her field."	2.94
"...if the individual had significant teaching experience."	2.64
"...if the individual held an advanced degree."	2.60*
"...if the individual was a district employee and otherwise qualified."	2.60*
"...if the individual had prior management experience (business, government)."	2.25*
"...only during periods of administrator shortage."	2.17*

*p<.05

Conclusion and Implications

Part I – Demographics:

The typical respondent had accrued ten or fewer years of experience as a superintendent, was fully-certified, and held an advanced degree. Fifty-two percent of the respondents served in elementary districts (K-8) and 38% worked in unified districts. Districts were predominately located in suburban and rural areas of California and enrolled between 1,001 to 10,000 students. Overall, slightly over half of the superintendents (52%) indicated that they would employ site administrators who qualified by examination, while 48% stated that they would not consider them for employment.

The demographic data suggested that: (1) the sample population was representative of California superintendents and (2) the perceived value of an administrative credential obtained by examination was mixed. As a result, applicants who may be able to demonstrate their knowledge and leadership skills, yet obtained a credential by examination, may be initially limited in securing employment in California. Therefore, under what conditions would a superintendent consider the candidacy of applicants so licensed?

Part II – Perceptions Regarding the Employment of a Site Administrator Holding a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential by Examination:

Respondents were asked to respond to ten statements. These statements suggested conditions by which applicants who were qualified by examination may be considered for employment. Superintendents agreed with three (of ten) conditions: (1) formal mentoring and on-the-job support, (2) prior management experience in out-of-state or private schools, and (3) prior experience in a quasi-administrative role, such as an assistant-to-the-principal or teacher-on-special assignment. These conditions were statistically significant ($p < .05$) and were the highest-ranked (by mean response). Obviously, prior leadership experience in education, either formal or informal, carries considerable weight during the hiring process.

On the other hand, superintendents pointed to four (of ten) conditions that were not as important in determining the employability of these candidates: (1) employed by the district, (2) holds an advanced degree, (3) has experience in private business or government, and (4) during an administrator shortage. These conditions were statistically significant ($p < .05$) and were the lowest-rated (by mean response).

The three remaining conditions were neither statistically significant nor highly-rated, yet yielded important conclusions. First, respondents viewed candidates who qualified by examination with some reservation ($M=2.98$). Second, teaching experience ($M=2.64$) and expertise in a particular field ($M=2.94$) were not influential elements during the hiring process. Clearly, candidates had to validate prior administrative-like experience regardless of how they obtained their initial certification.

These findings suggest that applicants for administrative positions should recognize that certain risks exist. Candidates are advised to inquire, in advance, whether or not applications will be accepted from individuals who hold an administrative credential based on an examination. Next, if an application is accepted, the candidate should be prepared to document prior experience served in a formal leadership role, such as site administrator of an out-of-state or private school. Assignment to an informal administrative support role, such as assistant-to-the-principal or teacher-on-special-assignment, should be described fully, including specific duties and responsibilities. Candidates are also encouraged to inquire about existing mentoring programs for new administrators and be prepared to self-select on-the-job support mechanisms, if necessary.

Part III – Open-Ended Comments:

Respondents expressed varied opinions regarding the nature of pre-service preparation, testing, and credentialing. The respondents differed on the validity of earned versus unearned administrative credentials, but were united in their opinion that the single most important variable in the hiring process was the individual candidate. Clearly, the applicant's unique abilities and characteristics were highly valued: (1) "It is all about the person," (2) "The decision to hire depends so much on the specific individual," and (3) "The decision would be very case-specific."

Superintendents who were unsupportive of the examination route expressed concern about the apparent lowering of standards and loss of professional prestige:

- “The notion that someone could qualify for a credential to be the principal of a school site through a written examination simply doesn’t make sense to me.”
- “I have a problem with the whole idea that there is a shortcut to leadership preparation. People who depend on those kinds of shortcuts may think that there are always shortcuts to accomplish goals.”
- “Alternative certification seems to reinforce the notion that anyone can teach or become a principal because it is easy. We are a profession that should require people to meet the highest standards.”

Supportive superintendents were just as adamant about the efficacy of the examination pathway:

- “I would not hesitate in hiring someone who has an administrative credential through examination.”
- “Credentialing is crucial, but the process to obtain it shouldn’t minimize the candidate’s qualifications.
- “There isn’t any difference from a student challenging a college course for credit; pass the test, the credit is yours.”

Superintendents valued life-long learning. Several respondents stated that they expected new administrators to earn advanced degrees and participate in professional development programs anyway. Several respondents recommended that administrators who qualified by examination undertake additional course work in school law, finance, and organizational theory.

Certain limitations exist in this study. The primary limitation is that the solicitation of data was confined to the respondents’ perceptions of pre-service preparation, their own prior experiences with university-preparation programs, and the examination process. A future study could investigate actual employment rates of administrative candidates from diverse backgrounds and varied preparation paths. Another interesting study could compare and contrast the skills attained by principals who were prepared traditionally and those certified by examination.

Summary

The findings of this study should inform policy-makers and potential applicants regarding the sentiment of top administrators charged with recommending the

employment of new administrators. Clearly, the field is split regarding the efficacy of hiring future principals based on a single examination. New administrators who obtain their credentials by examination are encouraged to: (1) seek varied quasi-administrative experiences, (2) secure on-going mentoring and support from their employing districts or from outside sources, and (3) enroll in coursework that supports identified areas of professional growth.

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