Filling the Vacuum in School Leadership

Teachers College Releases Major Study on Top-Level Education Challenges

By Joseph Levine

At a time when high-quality education leadership is critically needed for the nation’s schools, the quality of most preparation programs for principals, superintendents and other school leaders is judged by the Bancroft Prize jury to be “ inadequate to appalling.”

According to a major study by Teachers College President Arthur Levine:

“The four-year study, ‘Educating School Leaders,’ was based on an extensive national survey of deans, faculty, and program alumni, as well as 28 indepth case studies. It is part of a broader, four-part series of reports by Levine, known as ‘The Education Schools Project,’ drawn from the most extensive study ever conducted into the strengths, weaknesses and overall performance of the more than 1,200 departments and schools of education at colleges and universities across the country. The project plans to release equally comprehensive reports on teacher education this fall and research on education next year.”

The study’s first report — released on March 12th —comes at a time when the nation’s education leadership is becoming more dynamic, visionary leaders have never been more acute.

The educators struggling to adapt to the profound changes called for in the No Child Left Behind improvement plans and the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, even as more than 40 percent of principals and an even higher percentage of superintendents, are expected to leave their jobs over the next decade.

Yet ‘Educating School Leaders’ finds that university-based education leadership programs are simply not up to the task of filling the leadership void, Levine says. ‘The study, asserts Levine, many of those programs are engaged in a counterproductive’ race to the bottom,’ in which they compete for students by watering down coursework and offering faster and less demanding degrees.

Education schools are not entitled to this privilege of preparing the next generation of leaders. The study finds that this downward trend is exacerbated by states and school districts, which often hire education leaders for taking courses in administration or whether or not the material is relevant to their work, unless or rather school leaders who are the most experienced and successful are being hired and not the lowest in education related fields, but are among the lowest in all of academe.”

Inadequate Clinical Instruction

Clinical instruction is rare and inadequate. Furthermore, many university professors lack expertise in the academic and professional skills of school leaders. At the same time, just six percent of program alumni are principals, and only two percent have been supervisors or superintendents in courses of study that are not up to the task of filling the leadership void.

Offering a set of nine criteria by which education leadership programs should be judged, Levine’s report—which was funded by the Annenberg Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation—calls for the elimination of incentives for reducing program quality, for high quality standards for leadership programs, for the elimination of poor quality programs and for a new concept of leadership. Levine also argues that the Ed.D degree in Educational Administration should be eliminated, and that the new master’s in educational administration, while the doctor of philosophy degree in school leadership should be restructured and awarded solely to those who are preparing for a career in research.

More specifically, the study found that most education leadership programs are characterized by an irrelevant curriculum. Nearly 90 percent of program alumni surveyed and that schools of education fail to adequately prepare their graduates to cope with classroom realities.

Some findings from the study:

Low Admission and Graduation Standards

Education school graduate students in leadership program report the lowest ranking on academic motivation and performance. Further, the standardized test scores of students in these programs are not only among the lowest in education related fields, but are among the lowest in all of academe.”

Inappropriate Degrees

Educational administration is overwhelmingly engaged in nonempirical research, and it is disconnected from practice. Currently, the research in educational administration cannot answer questions as basic as whether schools led by graduates of school leadership programs can claim a higher level of student achievement.

Poor Research

We must change the system of accountability and promotion that education leaders face. By promoting well-informed and nonpartisan policy debate on how best to prepare the teachers, administrators and researchers who serve the nation’s school children.

“We must change the system and find new models for establishing strong leadership in our schools,” Levine says. ‘In the long term, I hope the report will play a part in broadly changing the system nationally but we’ll begin with trying to turn our recommendations into action on individual campuses and in some states.”

By Madeleine Perez

The authors of three acclaimed books, one on constitutional law, one on the history of the American South, and one on the history of Israel, are one of the authors of the Bancroft Prize winners.

The 2005 awards were for books published in 2004.

• The author of “Constitutions of America,” a book describing the history of the nation’s constitutions, has been awarded the Bancroft Prize for 2005.

• The authors of a book on constitutional law, “Constitutions of America,” have been awarded the Bancroft Prize for 2005.

• The authors of a book on constitutional law, “Constitutions of America,” have been awarded the Bancroft Prize for 2005.

The Bancroft Prize, which includes an award of $10,000, is named in honor of the late James B. Conant, the president of Harvard University.

Over 200 books were nominated for consideration by the Bancroft jury this year, noted Neal. ‘Once again, we were very impressed by the number of excellent submissions covering a broad range of themes, and are proud to announce this year’s winners.’

Ely is professor of history and Black studies at the College of William and Mary. He is also the author of “The Adventures of Anna’s Andy,” a Social History of an American Phenomenon among the African Americans. The book reconstructs the experiences of a free black community established in Virginia in the early 1800s. According to the Bancroft jury, “This model work of local history succeeds in illuminating both individual lives and large structures, and the result is a complex and arresting story that we all think turns attention to the values of race relations in the antebellum South.”

The author of “From Jim Crow to Civil Rights,” Klarman is the James Monroe Distinguished Professor of Law and professor of history at the University of Virginia. The Bancroft jury noted that “Klarman’s examination of this classic problem in American constitutional history is not only our best account of Brown, its antecedents and consequences, but also goes well beyond that.”

The Bancroft Prize winners were awarded at Columbia in 1948 with a bequest from Frederic Bancroft, the historian, author and strong leader in American history and diplomacy to and recognize exceptional books in the field.