AREL REPORT LEAVES MUCH IN THE DARK

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University Council for Educational Administration
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AN APPRAISAL OF AREL’S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION

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On February 5, 2013, the George W. Bush Institute released the report, *Operating in the Dark: What Outdated State Policies and Data Gaps Mean for Effective School Leadership*, produced by the Institute’s Alliance to Reform Education Leadership (AREL). Clearly, the development of a strong pipeline of school leaders is essential for increasing student learning and success in every school, and strategic state action that supports such a pipeline is critical. The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) applauds AREL’s effort to shed light on this important issue.

As an organization dedicated to improving the preparation of educational leaders, UCEA works with a broad range of educational leadership stakeholders to understand and improve the educational leadership pipeline. As such, we agree with the overall intent of the *Operating in the Dark* report, particularly the call for states to collect more and more accurate data about school leaders and their preparation. While the report sheds light on the need for more and better data as well as informed and strategic state action, it falls short of serving as a guiding light.

The following research-based appraisal of recommendations made in the *Operating in the Dark* report was developed by UCEA in an effort to inform policy conversations and initiatives concerning the role of state education officials and policymakers in supporting a high-quality educational leadership pipeline.

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AREL's first set of recommendations focus on “Principal Effectiveness Standards” (p. 33).

**We Agree…**

- All states should adopt research-based educational leadership standards. The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, used by 32 states, are, in fact, anchored to the research on effective educational leadership.\(^2\)
- State standards should be reflected in all phases of the leadership pipeline as outlined in the UCEA document “The Professional Pipeline for Educational Leadership: A White Paper Developed to Inform the Work of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.”\(^3\) We would suggest that states use this document and the multiple resources offered by the Wallace Foundation, in their efforts to develop a strong leadership pipeline.\(^4\)

**Our Concerns…**

- It is important to point out that the ISLLC standards and most other leadership standards reflect a much broader notion of effective educational leadership than conveyed in the Operating report (see, for example, the discussions on pages 9 and 15). The report should be read as reflecting a much narrower definition of leadership—one explicitly focused on instructional leadership; yet, research has found that other leadership responsibilities, such as organizational management, are critically important to effective leadership.\(^5\)

**Warning!**

- Be careful what you suggest that states measure. As we have found over and over again, the curriculum often narrows to focus on the core elements being measured. If principals were prepared to only do only the five behaviors mentioned on p. 15, schools would be left with a significant leadership and management deficit. We are left to wonder why AREL fails to mention the large number of other important roles research has found to be associated with effective school leadership.

AREL’s second set of recommendations focus on “Principal Preparation Oversight” (AREL, p. 33).

**We Agree…**

- States should “adopt and implement rigorous program approval standards” (p. 33), and that states should ensure that only consistently high quality programs, regardless of their organizational affiliation (e.g., universities, districts, state leadership academies, and both non-profit and for-profit organizations), are

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\(^2\) Young, M. D. & Mawhinney, H. (Eds.), (2012). *The Research Base Supporting the ELCC Standards*. Charlottesville, VA: UCEA.


\(^4\) http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/Pages/default.aspx

afforded the privilege of preparing leaders for service within publicly supported schools. UCEA program membership standards are grounded in such research-based qualities of effective preparation programs.  

- States should require that programs be “based on the design and programmatic elements aligned to current research to ensure that principals are graduating ready for the job (p. 19).” This is an important step toward ensuring widespread program quality, while inhibiting revenue-driven motivations for programs to offer the shortest and cheapest routes to certification as a means to attract potential candidates.  

It is important to note the significant increase in large, for-profit leadership preparation programs in recent years, few of which reflect the features associated with high quality leadership preparation.

Our Concerns...

- While UCEA strongly agrees that states should set high expectations for leadership preparation quality, creating such expectations is the easy part. Determining whether a given preparation program is of high quality is a much, much more difficult endeavor. The data points identified within the report as indicators of quality are dangerously inadequate. While they can serve diagnostic purposes akin to a doctor taking ones temperature and blood pressure, they will not suffice as measures of program quality. Both process and outcome data would need to be collected and appropriately analyzed as described in the UCEA guide “Developing Evaluation Evidence: A Formative and Summative Evaluation Planner for Educational Leadership Preparation Programs.” Importantly, there are proven processes for examining the quality of educational leadership preparation programs such as the UCEA Membership Review, Critical Friends Review, and more recently, the School Leadership Preparation and Practice Survey (SLPPS) Suite offered through UCEA’s Center for the Evaluation of Educational Leadership Preparation and Practice.

- Ensuring preparation program effectiveness requires significant state level capacity, including sufficient expertise for conducting program reviews, analyzing data and interpreting results for program approval, improvement, or closure. Over the last decade state departments have experienced tremendous staff turnover and cuts in human and fiscal resources. While states can depend on the expertise of scholars and practicing leaders in their program reviews, the trend toward downsizing state departments of education presents a serious impediment to conducting comprehensive and rigorous program evaluation.

Three Warnings!

- At the heart of the Operating report’s recommendations for ensuring quality preparation programs is the recommendation that “states should hold preparation programs accountable for their graduates’

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11 http://edleaderprepceu.squarespace.com
performance and track outcome data (p.33)” such as placement rates, retention rates, job effectiveness as measured by a principal’s formal evaluation, and job effectiveness as measured by student achievement (see pages 9 and 10). The implication that simple collection and reporting of such data is a straight-forward endeavor is misleading at best. Research paints a very different picture. While principal preparation programs do influence placement rates, retention rates, and estimates of principal effectiveness, other factors play a more important role in these outcomes. An evaluation system that depends on such data points as indicators of quality, rather than as diagnostic markers signaling a need for deeper investigation, could be more harmful than helpful.

- Prominent within the Operating in the Dark report is a recommendation to link measures of leader effectiveness to preparation. At present there are no methods for accurately estimating principal effectiveness using student test scores, making this recommendation unsound and detrimental. Indeed, recent work by leading researchers in the field concludes that current data and statistical methods simply do not allow for the accurate estimation of principal effectiveness using student test scores. Grissom, Kalgorides and Loeb (2012, p. 34) conclude, The warning that comes from [our analyses of principal effectiveness] is that it is important to think carefully about what the measures are revealing about the specific contribution of the principal and to use the measures for what they are, which is not as a clear indicator of principals’ specific contributions to student test score growth. (italics in original)

Similarly, Chiang, Lipscomb, and Gill (2012, p. 26) found that when evaluating principals in their first years of employment, “using measures of school effectiveness as the basis for those evaluations is an invalid method for gauging the principals’ true effectiveness.” The authors further argue that there is no known method to accurately assess principal effectiveness, particularly for those early in their careers.

- Finally, embedded in this section of the report recommendations is the suggestion that states “incentivize programs whose ratings indicate exemplary performance to expand” (p. 33). Even if satisfactory measures of exemplary performance could be identified, there is no research evidence to suggest that effective practice can be “taken to scale,” though a review of recent education reform reports reveals an infatuation with the idea of “scaling up.” What the research does reveal is the importance of high quality supervision and mentoring during field experiences and internships as well as the importance of cohorts, both of which depend upon program sizes and structures that support meaningful interpersonal interactions.13

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12 For example, the following factors, among others, have been shown to influence outcome measures of preparation programs: labor market location, principal turnover rates, growth in the number of schools within the labor market, changes in student demographics, state budgets, district budgets, changes in district leadership, working conditions in a school as well as the personal characteristics of the candidate.

AREL’s third set of recommendations focus on “Principal Licensure” (AREL, p. 34).

**We Agree…**

- The ability to license an individual for practice is perhaps a state’s most important policy lever for ensuring the preparation of quality candidates. We strongly agree that states should endeavor to design high-quality, psychometrically sound performance assessments and invest in evaluation efforts to ensure such performance assessments are found to be predictive of principal behavior and effectiveness.
- Higher Education should be engaged in assessing the growth of leadership candidates, and, in fact, many institutions already engage in such efforts. For the last decade, preparation programs that participate in national accreditation through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, formerly TEAC and NCATE) assess their graduate’s competency levels as they move through and complete their programs. More importantly, nationally accredited programs also use that data to make decisions about candidates’ fitness to continue, candidates’ professional learning and development needs, and program improvement. The report fails to consider national accreditation as a key leverage for improving the leadership pipeline. Yet, a number of states already partner with national and regional accrediting bodies, making this an obvious and complementary policy lever for supporting the kind of candidate evaluation the report endorses.

**Our Concern…**

- There is no evidence to support the notion of excluding input-based requirements, such as teaching experience, from the licensure process. Research, in fact, has demonstrated a strong correlation between effective teaching and instructional leadership success. Given the emphasis placed within this report on instructional leadership, the recommendation to discontinue the requirement for teaching experience is curious. If anything, one would expect a recommendation to enhance this requirement by requiring strong foundational knowledge of, experience in, and ability to support high quality teaching.

**Warning!**

- With regard to licensure renewal, we agree that decisions should be based on job performance and demonstration of competencies that correlate with principal effectiveness measures (such as the 360degree ValEd assessment); however, as noted above, researchers currently cannot accurately estimate principal effectiveness using student test scores for evaluative purposes. Thus, states must proceed with extreme caution and carefully consider contextual factors when determining whether a principal is effective enough to merit licensure renewal. The evaluation framework offered by the two national principals association, National Association of Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals, provides significant guidance in this area.15

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15 [http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/eval_report.PDF](http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/eval_report.PDF)
AREL’s fourth and final set of recommendations focus on “Principal Outcome Data” (AREL, p. 34), which more appropriately would have been titled: Principal Pipeline Data given that the recommendations in this section are not about principal outcomes, with the exception of “demonstrate an impact on student achievement” (p. 34). Rather, the data points recommended for inclusion in state longitudinal data systems in this section are focused on the principal career pipeline.

We Agree…

• As noted above, we agree with the overall intent of the Operating in the Dark report, particularly the call for states to collect more and better data about school leaders and their preparation. We agree that the absence of accurate and appropriate data and rigorous analyses of such data renders informed policy making next to impossible in most states.

Our Concerns…

• The report contends that “states need to be able to measure principals’ ability to secure jobs.” For individuals, job attainment certainly is an important concern, but why would it be a concern of the state? Perhaps the authors were suggesting states examine the placement rates of individuals completing preparation programs in order to assess program effectiveness or assess the balance of supply with demand. If the intent was the former, then the authors of this report are remiss in not cautioning states that simple rankings based on placement rates will provide inaccurate assessments of program effectiveness related to graduate placement. A wide variety of factors outside the control of programs influence placement rates and only results from relatively sophisticated analyses that control for these factors should be used in efforts to identify program effectiveness. If the intent was to assess supply and demand, we would agree that such information would be extremely valuable to collect and analyze.

• The report also recommends states be able to measure the ability of principals’ abilities to “retain jobs.” We suspect the authors intended to recommend states document principal tenure and retention rates. We agree that states should collect and disseminate data in this regard; however, numerous factors influence principal retention and states would need to invest heavily in data collection and rigorous analysis in order to accurately identify the causes and effects of principal turnover. Even if a state did make such an investment, many of the factors influencing turnover are at the school and district levels, thus largely out of the control of preparation programs and state policymakers. While states and preparation programs certainly influence principal turnover, AREL assumes that simply measuring principal turnover will reduce turnover. There is absolutely no evidence that this is true.  

Warning!

• The report recommends that states measure a principal’s “impact on student achievement,” and ability to “receive effective evaluation ratings” (p. 34). As discussed previously, accurately estimating principal effectiveness based on student scores is not currently possible for all principals. Even a Bush Institute affiliate concludes the effectiveness of principals in their first three years of employment cannot be...  

16 For example, Fuller and his colleagues have repeatedly reported Texas principal turnover data and shared the results with the state education agency and the legislature. As far as we can tell, no state policy action has been taken on this issue even though it has been six years since the first reports.
estimated accurately. This report prods states to engage in documenting principal effectiveness and to hold principals—and their preparation programs—accountable for changes in student test scores in the face of current consensus within the research field that such estimates cannot be made for evaluative purposes. Advocating for this kind of state action is akin to supporting malpractice.

**What is Missing?**

As we have noted above, the *Operating in the Dark* report illuminates an important set of issues around the state's role in supporting an effective leadership pipeline. The report, however, overlooks critical state and preparatory issues, reveals a lack of understanding of state departments and preparation providers, and, as a result, misses the opportunity to serve as a significant source of illumination on the issue.

Most notably, the AREL recommendations are not grounded in existing research. While we would not expect the document to include a complete and thorough literature review, we would expect a report of this nature to be based on the relevant research in this area. The report lacks citations of very important and widely read works, some of which we have referred to in this appraisal. The lack of a thorough review of the research could be the cause of some of the well-intentioned but misguided policy recommendations.

Additionally, the recommendations reveal a lack of understanding of aggressive and complex reforms underway within many states, preparation programs and the field at large. In fact, across the nation, scholars, policy makers, policy analysts, school leaders, professional associations, and foundations have been addressing needs in this area for years and such efforts are clearly not evident in the survey of state education officials.

Furthermore, the AREL recommendations also operate on several faulty notions about states and leadership preparation providers. For example, preparation providers are no longer autonomous entities. Increasing numbers of providers are designing and delivering preparation in collaboration with other entities (e.g., a university provider working with a school district or another university provider) that significantly impact recruitment, selection, curriculum, and delivery. Such partnerships raise important questions about the evaluation processes recommended in this report.

Similarly, the entire report and resulting recommendations assume that states are self-contained entities. Given that programs are no longer confined to brick and mortar buildings, much less a state jurisdiction, and that program candidates are increasingly crossing state lines to access preparation and leadership positions, recommendations that individual states take action are antiquated. A candidate in New Orleans may participate in a preparation program in Fort Worth in order to take a position in Fargo.

Finally, the report fails to account for the significant economic changes impacting states over the last decade. Fiscal shortfalls have led to decreased support for education in general, and most pertinent for the issue at hand, decreased support for district and university-based leadership development initiatives and state education department capacity. The AREL report makes no mention of the economic pressures for increased enrollment

through a reduction in required coursework and tuition, or the states’ role in fostering the decreases in funding available to public university-based preparation programs.

**Turning Up the Lights**

UCEA supports AREL’s effort to encourage the participation of state education officials and policymakers in ensuring high-quality principal preparation programs that produce well-qualified and highly capable school leaders. Furthermore, UCEA endorses the call for states to collect both more data and better data about school leaders and their preparation programs. However, UCEA does not agree with and will not support recommendations that simplify program quality to a handful of weakly related measures. Nor does UCEA agree that the simple collection of data will lead to policies that improve the quality of the principal pipeline.

Supporting high quality educational leadership preparation requires an evaluation system that reflects the complexity of leadership, teaching and learning. Simple indicators, such as retention rates, are woefully inadequate. Through its work with stakeholders and scholars in the educational leadership field, UCEA has turned up the lights on how to collect and examine program, candidate, and graduate data in sophisticated and rigorous ways. UCEA’s program evaluation planner, *Developing Evaluation Evidence*, and the SLPPS suite of program evaluation surveys are two important examples.

Given the extensive influence of effective school level leaders, our students, teachers, schools and communities deserve highly qualified and rigorously prepared leaders. UCEA welcomes the opportunity to work with stakeholders in supporting the development of educational leaders throughout their professional careers.

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Who We Are:
The University Council for Educational Administration

The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) is an international consortium of universities that offer doctoral programs in educational leadership and administration and are marked by a distinguishing commitment and capacity to lead the field of educational leadership and administration. UCEA has a single standard of excellence for membership: Superior institutional commitment and capacity to provide leadership for the advancement of educational leadership preparation, scholarship, and practice consistent with UCEA's established mission. UCEA's mission is to advance the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of all children and schools. UCEA fulfills this purpose collaboratively by 1) promoting, sponsoring, and disseminating research on the essential problems of practice, 2) improving the preparation and professional development of school leaders and professors, and 3) influencing policy and practice through establishing and fostering collaborative networks.

UCEA encourages membership among universities with the capacity and commitment to participate in research, development, and dissemination activities toward the ends of improving preparatory programs and solving substantial problems in educational leadership and administrative practice. Approximately 1,300 professors in 96 member institutions and over 1,000 additional faculty affiliates are involved in various aspect of the UCEA program. UCEA headquarters are currently hosted by the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education.