

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Poorly educated Superintendents threaten U.S. education**

by Wayne Goldstein

We've all heard the joke: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach; those who can't teach, teach teachers." Unfortunately, a four-year long study published in March 2005 by the The Education Schools Project, titled "Educating School Leaders" goes one step further in proving that "Those who can't teach teachers, teach teaching administrators." By administrators, I mean secondary school principals and superintendents. In fact, they are the weak link in the education chain, and this link has become so brittle that it holds together our national education system in appearance only. It is the superintendents and their principals who determine what is taught and how. Boards of Education may order, but it is the superintendents who ultimately decide what is required of the classroom teacher and the student. The anecdotal and factual evidence presented by this study show that we are in terrible trouble as a nation because of whom we train for these positions as well as what we do and don't train them to do. We may also be in trouble as a county because of who are educational administrators are and what they do and don't know.

This project, funded by three major foundations, was researched and written by Columbia University's Teacher's College faculty, staff, and graduate students, as well as others. The College's then-president, Arthur Levine, led the effort. Perhaps indicative of the brutal self-examination and truth of this report is the title of the chapter on the report's findings: "A Race to the Bottom". The report claims that few of the 250,000 school leaders being asked to respond to today's incredibly complex education leadership demands of continuously redesigning school systems have the training to be successful, and none of the nation's hundreds of institutions offering degree-granting graduate programs for school administrators have the awareness of or the interest in training them to be successful.

Instead, the project found that "Collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of all the programs at the nation's education schools." There are no exemplary programs in the U.S., although there is one in England. In 1987, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration recommended that at least 60% of the nation's educational administration graduate programs be closed. "This study found the overall quality of educational administration programs in the United States to be poor. The majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities."

In fact, there continues to be a proliferation of these programs that are nothing more than credit-granting diploma mills designed to let educators meet course and degree requirements to get salary increases. These "cash cow" degree programs are very profitable for colleges and universities because they use low-paid associate professors, are taught at cheap satellite campuses, and little is asked of the so-called education professionals clamoring to be admitted and to pay for them. "The curriculum seems little more than a grab bag of survey courses."

A national survey of school administrators done for this project showed that many were highly critical of the value of the programs they studied. "In general, standards of admission are low, lower than those of any other education school program we encountered...Looking at standardized test scores, educational administration applicants are among the lowest performers in education schools and in academe as a whole... Our study found that even at the more selective education schools, admissions standards for school leadership programs tended to be lower than the standards for many other education programs... For all intents and purposes, the majority of educational administration programs admit nearly everyone who applies."

"At another of the weaker education schools we visited... the dean said admission standards for his relatively new educational administration program were lax and the quality of graduates so low that professors couldn't recommend some for employment... Even the more competent students tend to produce poor work."

"... A faculty colleague answered by telling of a graduate student to whom she had given a "C" as a gift: The student was angry and said, 'I have a master's degree from this institution, from your department, and you're telling me I can't write?' " Few faculty and deans of these programs have any experience as principals, and fewer still as superintendents.

"Every few years a study is published examining the quantity and quality of research in school leadership and the conclusions are invariably the same--'the level and extent of scholarship is weak.' The most commonly cited weaknesses: Educational administration scholarship is atheoretical and immature; it neglects to ask important questions; it is overwhelmingly engaged in non-empirical research; and it is disconnected from practice." It was found that less than 3% of the 2000 articles published 1975-2002 on education administrator preparation were empirical studies.

The most productive education administration researchers are considered to be those who "have published at least one book, published at least one peer-reviewed article, delivered at least one paper, and obtained external funding in the past two years." This report came up with nine "Criteria for Excellence Applied to University-Based School Leadership Programs" and found that U.S. programs generally meet none of them although some individual programs met one or more of them.

The report also surveyed nontraditional training programs created by education professionals such as the California School Leadership Academy, Leadership Initiative for Transformation, Knowledge Is Power Program Academies, and the Urban Superintendents Academy. The project did not do a formal evaluation of these and other such programs, instead noting: "Testimonials abound, but no systematic research exists to demonstrate that these new programs are any more or less successful than the traditional versions... At this point, we know that alternative programs are different than those at universities. But we have no idea whether they are better or worse."

Instead, the project focused on The National College for School Leadership (NCSL), begun in England in 1998 as a "free-standing government agency created to be the equivalent of a national war college for school leadership-to provide a single national focus for school leadership development and research, to be the driving force for world-class leadership in schools, and to stimulate national and international debate on leadership." NCSL has specific goals and methods for achieving them, including helping educational leaders to successfully make the transition to the next level of responsibility, whatever that is. The project found it to be an ideal combination of theory and practice, each designed to reinforce the other. "The college is committed to what it calls 'actionable research,' designed to build a useable knowledge base for school leaders and policy makers." It meets all "Criteria for Excellence Applied to University-Based School Leadership Programs" but one, because it does not award degrees.

In its conclusion, the report states: "...The image that comes to mind is something out of The Wizard of Oz, a wizard or university granting an endless number of scarecrows the equivalent of honorary degrees." There are six pragmatic recommendations. The most interesting to me is this: "The doctor of education degree (Ed.D.) in school leadership should be eliminated."

Will anyone listen? "Yet education schools and their leaders continue to deny problems and resist improvement. In this study, more than eight out of 10 education school deans with programs to educate principals (86 percent) and superintendents (83 percent) rated them as good to excellent..."

While the project hopes that the education schools will somehow recognize the massive failing of their programs and fix them, there is the suggestion that individual states should create their own "State Colleges for School Leadership" modeled on the English NCSL program.

How does this relate to MCPS? Jerry Weast graduated from newly named Allen County Community Junior College in Kansas, with its countywide aspirations, in 1967, beginning there just after it stopped being the local lola Junior College. He then earned a bachelor's in science degree in 1969, a master's in science degree in 1972, and an education specialist degree in 1974, all from Pittsburg State University, also in Kansas. He received a doctorate in education degree (Ed.D.) from Oklahoma State University in 1981. How good is Weast's education in education? Is he at all intimidated by the graduate degrees held by many MCPS parents? Could that explain his penchant for cutting out community participation and operating in secret? Is he afraid that his much better-educated peers in the community might see him as less able if they worked closely with him? Decades of professional experience can make up for a less than stellar formal education, but does he know what he did not know and has he worked to overcome gaps in his education?

Did his work at Harvard's Graduate School of Education throughout the '90s that apparently ended entirely in 2001, other than being a "member" of its "Public Education Leadership Project", help him become better or best at his job? What are we to make of the scant amount of research and writing that he attributes to himself, with none apparently having been done since 2003? What is a "Special member, Graduate Faculty, College of Education, University of Maryland"? Does he teach at all? Is he capable of doing so? He graduated college in 1969 and then went immediately into teaching accounting and psychology. Seven years later, in 1976, he became superintendent for the Uniontown, Kansas Unified School District, which today has 445 students in grades K-12.

If we could ever question Weast directly to find out what it is he actually is experienced and knowledgeable about, what would we find? Is he asking more of our students than he has asked or does ask of himself? Does he really understand the research that MCPS does? Could it be that he has his loyal staff cherry pick the most favorable data and then package it as part of MCPS' steady diet of relentlessly good news? Are his coterie of demi-superintendents well-educated in their fields, or are they gifted mimics who cannot interpret data or answer tough questions of educational policy in a coherent manner?

If The Education Schools Project can be so relentlessly critical of the nation's education administration establishment and all of its participants, shouldn't county residents be allowed to challenge the credentials of those who are products of this deeply dysfunctional system who work for MCPS?